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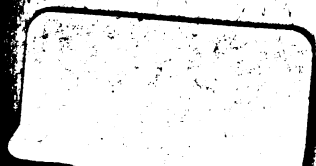
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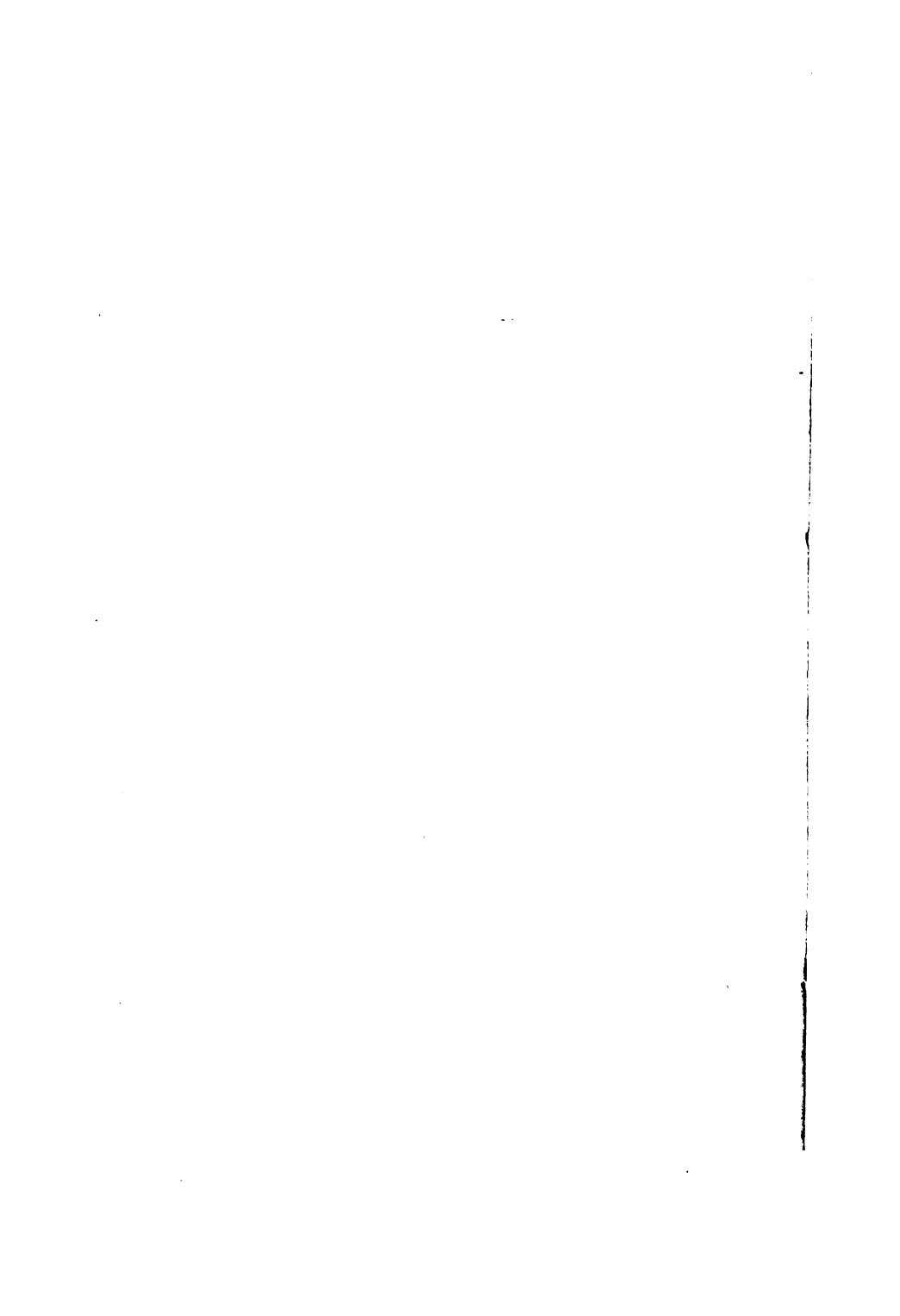
117



Oppenheimer

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"He sat watching the extinct grey ashes on the hearth."
FRONTISPIECE. See Page 180.

ENOCH STRONE

A MASTER OF MEN

BY

E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

AUTHOR OF

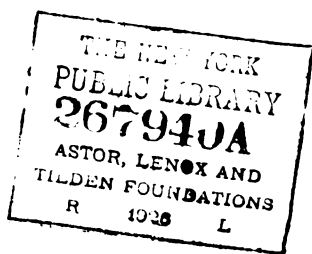
"A MAKER OF HISTORY," "THE MALEFACTOR," "THE MAN
AND HIS KINGDOM," "A MILLIONAIRE OF
YESTERDAY," ETC.

Illustrated by J. W. Kennedy

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Enoch Strone



LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

"He sat watching the extinct grey ashes on the hearth"	<i>Frontispiece</i>
"They made a clumsy rush towards her" . .	<i>Page 110</i>
"'You are not great enough,' he cried" . .	" 274

26 X 8 3 2

ENOCH STRONE

BOOK I.

CHAPTER I.

Upwards in long sinuous bends the road wound its way into the heart of the hills. The man, steadily climbing to the summit, changed hands upon the bicycle he was pushing, and wiped the sweat from his grimy forehead. It had been a grey morning when he had left, with no promise of this burst of streaming sunshine. Yet the steep hill troubled him but little—he stepped blithely forward with little sign of fatigue. Once he paused to gather a little clump of primroses, and once to stoop down and admire a few shoots of soft green bracken springing up by the roadside. His workman's clothes, open at the throat, showed him the possessor of a magnificent pair of shoulders, the suggestion of great physical strength was carried out also in his hard, clean cut features and deep set piercing grey eyes. He passed a spinny where the ground was blue with budding hyacinths, and he loitered for a moment, leaning upon the saddle of his

bicycle, and gazing up the sunlit grade. A line or two of Keats sprang to his lips. As he uttered them a transfiguring change swept across his face, still black in patches as though from grimy labour. His hard, straight mouth relaxed into a very pleasant curve, a softer light flashed in his steely eyes. A tiny rabbit scudded across the grass grown path and disappeared down a friendly hole. He smiled at its frantic haste, and presently resumed his climb. He reached a wooden gate at last on his right hand side, and pushing it open skirted a grey stone wall until he came to a sudden dip in the field, and with its back against a rocky eminence a tiny cottage built of the stones which lay in heaps about the turf. He leaned his bicycle against the wall, and taking a key from his pocket unlocked the door.

"Saturday at last," he exclaimed aloud, in a tone which, save for a note of bitterness, would have been full and pleasant enough. "Thirty-six hours of freedom. Phew!"

He had plunged a basin into the soft water tank outside and held his head in it for a moment. Then all dripping he carried a canful to a hollow bath ingeniously fixed amongst the rocks against which the cottage was built, and throwing off his soiled clothes plunged in. Unconsciously he straightened himself at the touch of the water, stinging cold from the well, and with his head thrown back, and clean, strong limbs thrown into vivid relief against the shelving green turf, he seemed for a moment, notwithstanding a certain ferocity of bearing and demeanour, to grow into

the semblance of one of those ancient and mythical gods who walked naked the dark green slopes of Olympus. Certainly there was no longer any sign of the grease-stained mechanic when he emerged, and with his towel wrapped lightly around him stepped into the cottage.

He reappeared in a few minutes clad in a grey homespun suit, which showed many signs of wear, a pipe in his mouth, a book in his hand. Leisurely he filled a kettle from the well and thrust it into the centre of the small wood fire which he had kindled. Then with a sigh of relief he threw himself upon the soft mossy turf.

The book lay unheeded by his side. From his high vantage point he looked downwards at the wide panorama which stretched to the horizon, faintly and mistily blue. The glorious spring sunshine lay like a quickening fire upon the land. The tree tops, moving lightly in the west wind, were budding into tender green, the dark pine groves were softened, the patches of rich brown soil freshly turned by the plough gleamed as though with promise of the crops to come. Below him the dusty white lane along which he had travelled stretched like a narrow white belt, vanishing here and there in the woods and disappearing at times between lichen-stained grey walls. He traced it backwards across the silvery brook back to the quaint village with its clustering grey stone houses, red-tiled roofs and strange church tower, and watched for a moment the delicate wreaths of smoke curl upwards, straight with the promise of fine weather. Further still he followed

it into the flat country past the reservoirs, a brilliant streak of scintillating light, back into the heart of the town from whence he had come, and which stretched there now in the middle distance a medley of factory chimneys and miles of houses—a great foul blot upon the fair landscape. He remembered it as he had ridden out an hour or so ago, the outskirts with all their depressing ugliness, a cobbled road, a shabby tram-car with a tired horse creeping along a road where dirty children played weary games and shouted shrilly to one another. A miserable region of smoke-begrimed houses and small shops, an unattractive public-house at every corner round which loafed men with the white faces of tired animals, and women dragging babies and shouting abuse to their more venturesome offspring. With painful distinctness he saw it all—the opened factory gates, the belching out of a slatternly mob of shrieking girls and ribald youths, the streets untidy with the refuse of the greengrocers' shops, the hot, fetid atmosphere of the low-lying town. He closed his eyes—ah, how swiftly it all vanished! In his ears was the pleasant chirping of many insects, the glorious sunshine lay about him like wine, the west wind made music in the woods, one thrush in particular was singing to him blithely from the thatched roof of his cottage—a single throbbing note against a melodious background of the whole woodful of twittering birds. The man smiled to himself, well pleased. A day and half's respite from slavery—here! It was worth while after all.

He stretched out his hand for his book, and puffed

contentedly at his pipe. Suddenly he looked up, frowning. Someone was scrambling up the rude path from behind the cottage. In a moment appeared the head and shoulders of a man against the sky line. The new comer paused for a moment to admire the view—then, seeing the figure recumbent upon the grass, came hastily down.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Strone! I am glad to find you at home.”

Enoch Strone looked his visitor up and down with frowning face.

“Have you lost your way?” he asked, gruffly. “This is private property.”

The new comer flushed slightly. He was a middle-aged, pleasant faced man, with brown beard and humorous mouth, quietly dressed in dark grey. He wore a clergyman’s hat.

“I came to see you,” he answered. “My name is Martinghoe, and I am the vicar of Bangdon.”

Strone frowned more heavily than ever. He rose to his feet without any attempt at greeting, burly, almost repulsive-looking in his slow anger.

“Yes, yes,” he said, impatiently. “I know who you are. But what do you want with me?”

“You are one of my few parishioners,” Martinghoe explained, with a smile. “I have tried twenty times to catch you, but always unsuccessfully. Once or twice I fancy that I have seen you in full retreat into the woods—this time I think I have run you to earth!”

Strone smiled grimly.

“I am afraid that you have wasted your time,” he

said, shortly, "if you have come out here purposely to see me. I am not a Christian, and nothing would induce me to set foot in a church. I have no money to give away, and I get very bad-tempered when I am intruded upon. You will find a more direct path into the road by that gate," he added, pointing downwards.

"I'll try it soon," Martinghoe answered, pleasantly. "In the meantime you won't object to my sitting down for a moment and enjoying your view. I'm really out of breath."

Strone grunted something inarticulate, relit his pipe, and took up his book. The sound of a match made him glance up quickly. His unbidden visitor had also lit a huge briar, and was puffing away contentedly.

"Not in the way, am I?" he asked. "This is such a delightful spot."

Strone laid down his book once more.

"Yes," he said, "you are. Listen. I'll be frank with you, and then perhaps you'll go. I'm a mechanic, foreman at Dobell's engineering works in Gascester, and I've bought this piece of land and built this cottage myself because I'm fond of solitude, and I ride backwards and forwards, winter and summer, for the very same reason. This is my Saturday afternoon, which I look forward to all the week, and you've already spoilt ten minutes of it. Now is that plain enough?"

"Quite," Martinghoe answered, without any sign of annoyance. "I'll go! But first, is this book yours? It was brought to me by one of the keepers, and I fancied that those might be your initials in it."

Strone literally pounced upon it. The blackness vanished from his face like magic. He took the volume almost tenderly into his hands.

"Yes, it's mine," he exclaimed. "I lost it last Sunday, and I've spent hours looking for it."

"Heggs picked it up and he thought it might be mine. I hope you don't mind. I read it through last night from beginning to end."

A transfiguring gleam of humour flashed across Strone's face.

"You!" he exclaimed, "a parson, and read fairy tales!"

Martinghoe roared out laughing.

"My dear fellow," he answered, "if you've read more poetry and fairy tales than I have I'll make you a present of my whole library. I have a first edition of the 'Sundering Flood,' and I know my Morris well. Do you think that we read nothing but the Bible and theology?"

"I didn't know," Strone answered. "How should I?"

Martinghoe's hand fell upon his shoulder.

"Look here," he said, "don't send me away till we've had a chat. I'm a lonely man, and I ain't so fond of it as you are. I haven't a soul to talk to from week end to week end. You read a bit and so do I. You have grit in you, or you wouldn't be here. Let's have a pipe together."

Strone smoked stolidly for a moment.

"You don't know the sort of man I am," he said, suddenly. "I don't believe in a word of the Bible,

and I'm not at all sure that I believe in a hereafter at all. I look upon church-going as a farce, and nothing would induce me to set foot inside one. Besides, I am a working-man—my father died of drink, mother in the asylum. Is it likely that I'm fit company for a parson?"

Martinghoe smiled.

"I don't believe that you've ever spoken to one in your life," he said, "and you've an idea that we go about like Salvation Army captains shouting for souls. I'm quite prepared to respect your religious beliefs or disbeliefs. Your brain is as good as mine. You may be right and I wrong. Who knows? Some day, perhaps, we'll talk of it, but not unless you wish. As to the rest—well, it only proves that you're a better man than I. The balance is on your side at any rate."

Strone for the first time surveyed his visitor with some appearance of interest. He took note of the shapely, sensitive mouth, the broad forehead, the clear, bright eyes which sought his so frankly. This was a different type of parson to any with whom he had ever come into contact. A man all over, loveable, human, magnetic! Yet Strone was obstinate to the backbone. He hated to change his mind.

"You don't approve of the Salvation Army, then!" he remarked, gruffly.

"I didn't say so," Mr. Martinghoe answered, smiling. "Only I think that theirs is one of those rare cases in which enthusiasm defeats its own object—over enthusiasm, of course, I mean. Yet it is very hard to be critical, for they appeal to a class who are

almost hopeless. Their mistake, I think, is that they do not limit their energies to that class. The attempt to convert men and women of education can do nothing but harm!"

Strone looked up with a grim smile.

"Proselytism is a feverish pursuit," he remarked. "The man who has once converted another to his opinion is never happy until he can start on somebody else. You're quite sure you haven't a Bible in your tail-coat pocket, Mr. Martinghoe?"

Martinghoe laughed.

"If I have, I'll keep it in its place!" he promised. "I won't try to read it to you."

Strone move towards the cottage without another word.

"Excuse me," he said, "my kettle is boiling over. Will you have a cup of tea?"

Martinghoe jumped up with alacrity.

"Rather!"

CHAPTER II.

The Reverend John Martinghoe sat upon a knoll, drank tea out of a mug and munched thick bread and butter with much apparent relish. Strone entertained the first guest of his life with a sort of surly cordiality, the mask of a considerable amount of shyness. Yet the two men dropped into talk naturally enough afterwards when their pipes were lit. Martinghoe himself, a scholar and a man of considerable attainments, was amazed at the extent and depth of the other's reading. This was none of the cheap culture of the superior working-man, no free library veneer. Strone had drawn the sap where he had tapped the tree. He could quote Carlyle by the page and, more wonderful still, he had read between the lines, and he knew the other meaning. He spoke of Swinburne, and half closed his eyes as though the roar of the Cornish sea were indeed in his ears. Martinghoe became the listener—the study of the man was fascinating. Softened though his face had become during the last half hour it was yet hard, and in a measure sullen. His hands were roughened with toil, he lay in a posture which not even his massive strength could render graceful. All the while he talked oddly, jerkily, yet giving every moment proof of a marvellous memory, an insight far above that of the average well-read man.

Martinghoe seemed to realise that this was the unburdening of one whose lips had never yet been unsealed. There were crudities of thought every now and then. Martinghoe caught them and smoothed them down. Strone nodded with placid approval. Here and there came a lurid piece of criticism, a passionate protest. Martinghoe felt that he was looking out upon life from a new standpoint, and the difference was wonderful. He exerted all his tact to keep the other talking. It was evident that Strone had not won his way through unscathed. His Carlylean hatred of all humbug and false pretence was a militant thing, it had come to him with experience. His tongue at times was like a lash, he himself had felt the sting of the things he loathed. So it seemed when at last they rose as though with a common impulse to their feet and Martinghoe stretched out his hand for his hat.

The sunlight had long ago faded from the land. A glimmering twilight made dim patchwork of the fields, and an evening breeze bent the tree tops in the wood below. Far away a wan glare in the sky brooded over the town. Strone pointed downwards with the bowl of his pipe.

"You'll think me a heathen, I know," he said, "if not you, other people, because I can't believe in a God. Yet I tell you this. Take my place yonder for a week and your own faith would totter. Ay, that's a sure thing."

"Go on," Martinghoe said. "I want to understand your point of view."

"Mine is the point of view of the man who knows,"

Strone answered. "It's written down there in great black letters, and those who don't see it are those who won't. You go to Gascester sometimes, I suppose, sir?"

"Not often," Martinghoe admitted. "I go only when I am obliged."

Strone nodded.

"You might go every day," he said, "and you would never know the place as I know it. You would never see what I see. It's quite picturesque from here, isn't it, with all those lights shining through the mist? Now, I'll tell you the truth. I'll tell you what I see day by day. Miles upon miles of dirty streets lined with small red brick houses all of a pattern, all hopelessly ugly, public-houses at every corner like flies upon a carcase, stunted and weary-eyed men, vicious because their eyes are for ever fastened upon the hideous side of life, because for ever they must look downwards—drink-sodden and foolish women, leaving their children to struggle up as best they can—and may your God help 'em, for they'll need it. Pavements crowded with sickly-looking youths, apeing the sins of their elders—immature girls ever hovering around the fringe of vice; drawn into it sooner or later as into a maelstrom. You think I'm exaggerating. I'm not! It's truth! You may walk for miles, and they shall stream past you in hordes. You shall look at them one by one, and you will be amazed. It is as though the devil had smeared them all with one great daub of his brush. They are all of the same hopeless type, ever with eyes looking downwards, down into the nether

world. They are worse than cattle. They are like the swine possessed with the knowledge of evil things."

"You are speaking of the slums, of course, Mr. Strone," his visitor said, with a sigh. "I know that they are terrible. They are the one great blot on our civilisation."

"It isn't the slums alone," Strone answered. "In their way the suburbs are as bad. There's the manufacturer, a snob, bursting with self-conceit because he's made his bit of money, forgets his shopmates, builds a big house, sticks a crest upon his carriage, warms to his wife's petty schemes for social advancement, goes to church, and heads a subscription list. Eats too much, drinks too much, but worships respectability. Narrow, ignorant! Great heavens, there aren't any words to describe how ignorant and narrow such a man can be. He, too, looks ever downwards."

"You are too sweeping, Strone. You speak of a type! It exists, I know, but not alone."

Strone shrugged his shoulders.

"I have nothing to do with the exceptions," he answered. "I speak of the majority. The world is governed by majorities. Slum and suburb, our cities are beastly places. Why don't you cleanse them, sweep them clean, you Christians, who spend fortunes upon your churches and cathedrals, and send missions into every country on the globe. There's your raw material—your humanity—ready waiting. What's your God doing?"

"You're a pessimist, Strone!"

"I'm not! I'm simply a man who likes to see things

as they are. I like the truth and the daylight. Most of you who should have your hand to the plough prefer to grope through life with a bandage about your eyes—only your noses seem to lead you to the pleasant places.”

Martinghoe was silent. The man’s words were bitter enough, but his earnestness robbed them of offence.

“You are rather severe upon us as a class, I think,” he said. “Yet you must remember that these cities you speak of—Gascester, for instance—have many workers who are giving their lives for their fellows. In every district practical efforts are being made to get at the people. The generations to come will bear witness to the labours of to-day.”

Strone shrugged his shoulders.

“It may be so,” he answered. “It’s easy to talk, I know. But you must remember that I am one of the people. I see these things day by day. I believe that whoever made the world, it was meant to be a place beautiful, and life was meant to have its joys. Yet for ninety-nine out of every hundred down there it is like a foretaste of Hell. Vice takes the place of joy, and men and women go groping through the quagmire of life with fast closed eyes. They see nothing, know nothing—save of evil. It’s beastly.”

Martinghoe sighed.

“It is an inexhaustible subject,” he said, “and I am deeply interested in it. May I come and talk with you again?”

"Why not! I've had my say. Next time I'd like to hear you talk."

Martinghoe held out his hand.

"Well, I won't preach. I can promise you that: Good-bye."

Martinghoe had gone—was out of sight. Strone refilled his pipe, and sat looking down upon the blurred landscape—the lights flashing here and there, the glow in the sky, redder now and deeper. All around a soothing and delicious silence was brooding over the land. The unwonted excitement of speech was tingling still in his veins,—called for action. He rose and strolled down to the boundary of the wood. For awhile he lingered with his arms resting upon the paling looking into the cool, dark wilderness, the tangled shades of bramble and young pines, a delicate study in tender green only a few hours ago, now impenetrable, a shadowy chaos. There was no reason apparently for him to proceed further, nothing to attract him save the faint sweet music of creaking boughs and moving tree tops, yet every moment he was conscious of a stronger impulse to go forward. Afterwards he remembered and marvelled at it, sometimes with wonder, sometimes a deeper feeling, as he remembered all that hung upon those few moments' indecision. A man without any superstitions himself, although a delighted student of the ancient and picturesque superstitions of earlier races, he nevertheless moved slowly along that dimly visible path with quickly beating heart and a very distinct sense of excitement. There

was something mysterious in these shadowy solitudes, the deep silence broken only by the wind music and the occasional scurrying of a scared rabbit. Yet his common sense mocked him. What could happen to him here? Surely nothing! A meeting with Heggs, the keeper, perhaps, the exchange of a pipe of tobacco, a little chat about the nest of young owls over which he had been watching so tenderly. Yet he was conscious of some such feeling of half mysterious wholly pleasant excitement as had stolen into the heart of Walter when he had passed into the Strange Land.

CHAPTER III.

Strone came to a break in the wood, where the ground was carpeted with hyacinths and the air faint with their soft, sweet perfume, and here in the middle of the path his foot kicked against something soft. He stooped and picked it up. It was a woman's shoe. He turned it over and over again in his hand. It was made of some soft black material, nearly new, with high heel and arched instep, and the lining was warm. It was a cheap enough article of its sort, turned out by thousands with the help of modern machinery, but it possessed a certain daintiness of shape, and it had probably been labelled "direct from Paris." It was not a shoe, in any case, to have been discarded, nor was it likely to have come into its present position by supernatural means. The fact was borne in upon him that the wearer must be somewhere close at hand.

He drew a deep breath which was almost a gasp. The little shoe seemed to burn his hand. He looked slowly around him, and his heart was beating like a sledge hammer. The shoe was probably an accident, its owner a matron of years and many children. He scarcely cared. To him it was emblematical of an unknown world, the world feminine, whose daughters had filled the universe with poetry and swayed the lives of giants. Nevertheless, a world unknown to

him, a paradise across whose portals he had never passed. How should he indeed? Those who had come his way he had not even considered. Loud-tongued factory girls, anæmic dressmakers, befringed barmaids he had counted sexless—the music of Byron, the love-yearnings of Keats were never for such as these. The women of his thoughts dwelt together in a wonderful garden fenced jealously about with rose-bushes and lilac trees, and many sweet-smelling flowers and shrubs. The mechanic's place was outside. And now—

He found her almost at once—a dark prostrate body, her head resting upon a fallen tree. What he had feared at first might be death, or at least a faint, was only sleep. She lay there in the full grace of natural, unaffected repose, and Strone stood over her with fast-beating heart. At first he was vaguely disappointed. She was, after all, of his order. Her little black jacket was shabby, and her brown skirt ancient. Around her throat was a piece of ribbon, her hair was a deep soft brown. It struck him that her eyes might be pretty. The mystery of the shoe was explained in a manner which gave him a quick start. One foot lay bare upon the turf, soft and white enough in the twilight—a black stocking by her side. In her sleep she had probably kicked the shoe away. Strone watched and came back to earth.

“One of that noisy factory crew who had their treat at Crooks' farm, I suppose,” he muttered. “But what on earth is she doing here?”

He looked around with quick suspicion—groundless as it proved. She was alone. Then he hesitated.

"Lost her way and fallen asleep. She'll be an awful nuisance. I'll go."

But he didn't. In his heart he knew that he had never meant to. Instead he filled his pipe, lit it carefully so that the sound should not disturb her, and sat down on the trunk of a fallen tree a few feet away. He leaned forward with folded arms and studied her as a problem.

"Pity that sort of woman cannot sleep for ever—always dumb, free from vulgar speech or awkward movement," he said to himself, softly. "She's of her class no doubt. Just now she's graceful, long limbs, soft curves, pretty hair. Probably when she walks she swaggers, and when she opens her mouth——"

He shuddered, smoked on thoughtfully, and waited.

"Perhaps I'd better wake her. I can't sit here all night, and she's got to get home somehow."

He stood up frowning, angry with himself for his little attempt at self-deceit. For, apart from other considerations, he had been very well content to sit there watching her. He stooped down and touched her arm. She awoke at once, sat up in blank bewilderment, and screamed.

"It's all right," he said, gruffly. "I found you asleep here—thought I'd better wake you. It's getting late."

"Late! Why, good gracious, it's dark."

She caught up her stocking and shoe, and, turning

sideways, hastily put them on. Then she rose lightly to her feet.

"What time is it?" she asked, fearfully.

"Nigh upon nine o'clock, I should say," he answered.

She looked around her helplessly.

"It's beastly of them," she declared. "They've gone and left me on purpose. If they'd taken the least trouble to shout I must have heard them. It's that mean Julia Ross. I'll pay her out for this."

"They have certainly gone," Strone remarked. "Where do you come from—Gascester?"

She nodded. Her eyes were full of tears.

"Yes. How far is it?"

"Nine miles!"

Her under lip twitched.

"Oh, lor!—and my foot's hurting awful. That's why I took my shoe off. I ran away from Jim Hassell—he was plaguing me so, and I fell down. Nine miles. I can't walk it. What shall I do?"

"Well, I don't know," he answered, puzzled. "There's an inn at Lingford."

"I've no money for an inn," she answered quickly. "I'd stayed here only I'm afraid. Are you a keeper?"

"No. I live close by."

She looked at him anxiously, drawing her gloves through her hand.

"Can't I, couldn't I sit in your house till morning? Would your wife mind? I don't want a bed. An easy chair would do proper."

"I have no wife," he answered. "I live alone."

"Is there no other house?" she asked, in despair.

"Not within two miles—and they'd all be gone to bed," he answered. "You can have my room if you like."

She accepted without the slightest hesitation.

"I'll be no trouble," she said, eagerly, "and I'll start off as soon as it's light. Which way?"

She followed him along the path, limping a little and shaking out her crumpled skirts. He helped her awkwardly over the paling, and led the way up the steep green bank. At the entrance to the cottage he paused and pointed backwards to that dome-like glow in the sky.

"That's Gascester," he said briefly.

She looked downward with a little cry.

"Why, how near it seems—and what a colour the sky is! Is that a fire?"

He shook his head.

"It's only the reflection of the lights in the sky. Come in."

"Is this where you live? What an odd little place."

"I hope that you were not expecting anything palatial," he remarked, sarcastically.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing! You see as I live alone I don't require much room. Come in."

She peered about, and laughed softly to herself. It was a pleasant laugh, and Strone was relieved. He had dreaded a giggle.

"Why, it looks as though you'd made all the things

yourself," she exclaimed. "Chairs and tables and bedstead and all!"

"That is precisely what I did," he answered, poking the fire.

"Why? Are you poor?" she asked. "We are."

"Well, I'm not rich," he answered, "but it wasn't that so much. I don't like modern furniture—the cheap sort, anyway. I like this better."

"They look ever so funny," she said. "It's like a doll's house. There's some beautiful furniture in the shop at the corner of our street—green plush chairs and a sideboard, with a mirror in it."

He shuddered, and plunged his head into a cupboard.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

"Yes," she declared, promptly. "I ain't going to take your supper, though."

"There's enough for two," he answered.

He produced some bread and cheese and cold meat, and busied himself making coffee. Suddenly he stopped in the midst of cutting bread.

"What about your people?" he asked. "Won't they be anxious?"

She laughed heartily.

"It's Saturday night," she said, "and father will be too drunk to know whether I'm home or not, and mother won't care. Someone else will have to look after the kids, though."

He asked no more questions, but summoned her to the table, dividing up the crockery as well as he could, for the entertainment of guests had never entered into

his scheme of life. She laughed at his efforts to cut meat with a spoon, and drank her coffee as though scarcely used to it. If there was any embarrassment between them it was not on her side. In the midst of the meal she took her hat off, and threw it down. He knew then that she was pretty, notwithstanding an abominable attempt at a fringe.

"What do you do with all those books?" she asked.

"Read them!"

"My! Are they novels?"

"A few."

"You must be very fond of reading."

"I am," he answered. "Aren't you?"

She shook her head.

"No time. I read the 'Young Ladies' Journal' sometimes. My married sister takes it. I like the stories—real, good, love stories they are. Have you any love stories?"

"One," he admitted, smiling faintly.

"What's it called? I wonder if I've read it?"

"It is the love story of Abelard and Heloise," he answered.

She shook her head disparagingly. She did not think much of the title.

"Never heard of it."

"It is scarcely a popular story," he said. "Tell me your name."

"Milly Wilson. Don't you want to talk about stories?"

"Not just now," he admitted. "Where do you live in Gascester?"

"Plumb Court, Wharf Street. Nice neighbourhood, ain't it? It's near the shop where we work. I say, are you a gentleman?"

He shook his head.

"I have never been mistaken for such a thing in my life," he assured her.

"A schoolmaster, then?"

"No, I am a mechanic," he told her "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I don't know. You don't talk like me, and you seem to kind of fancy yourself."

He laughed long and heartily. She seemed doubtful whether to join in or to be offended. As for Strone, he felt more at ease than as yet he had done. After all he had better have stolen away while she slept, kept the shoe—and the romance.

"I am sorry," he said. "You see I live alone and my manners suffer. What are you looking for now?"

She was gazing about the room in a puzzled sort of way.

"I don't see any stairs," she said.

"There are none."

"Then where's your other room?" she asked, suddenly.

"I haven't one. In the summer I sleep out of doors. I am going to to-night."

She looked away awkwardly.

"I'm sorry to put you out. You must be sorry you found me."

"I don't think I am," he answered. "You would have caught cold there."

"I should have been mortal scared," she declared, laughing.

He rose, filled his pipe, and walked to the door. A flood of yellow moonlight had fallen upon the earth. The dark tree tops were still, every leaf and bough distinct upon the deep blue sky. For miles around the outline of the country, the hedgerows and the sentinel trees were like a painted landscape—a wonderful picture of silent life. Of movement or of sound there was nothing. The whole land was sleeping. A few insects were chirping in the hollow near the wood, the music of a distant sheep bell came faintly from a great distance. Strone puffed out dense volumes of smoke, and leaned against the doorway, happy after his own fashion. This was the solitude he loved. Then he started and nearly dropped his pipe. A soft hand touched his. The girl was by his side—her pale face spiritualised in the moonlight, her eyes glistening with tears.

"It is so beautiful here," she murmured, "and so still."

He smiled.

"You would rather be under the gaslamps, perhaps!"

She shuddered.

"I wish that God would burn the whole town," she cried, passionately; "house by house, street by street. I wish that I was never going to see Gascester again. I wish—I wish—"

She was sobbing. Strone looked at her, surprised, curiously sympathetic. She was so pretty, so much in

earnest, and the story of her life, ay, and the life of her kind, was written so painfully in her wan face.

“You are over-tired,” he said, gently. “See, I will show you where to sleep; to-morrow you will have forgotten all this, and I will take you home across the fields.”

She followed him wearily into the house; afterwards he climbed the hill above the cottage, and smoked there for hours. He was restless, and ill disposed for sleep. For ever there seemed to ring in his ears the passionate unspoken wish of the child who slept now, peacefully enough on his rude oaken bedstead.

CHAPTER IV.

A grey morning, windless but cold. Strone awoke with a start, sat up and listened. Surely he had heard light footsteps close at hand, or had he been dreaming? He rose slowly to his feet, stiff, for the woodshed was draughty, and he had not even a rug for covering. A distinct sound now—the gate leading to the road was softly opened and closed. He hastened to the front, lifted the latch of his cottage, and looked in.

The room was empty, the bed neatly made, and the remains of their supper cleared away. His visitor had gone.

Curiously enough, his first impulse was of vexation. To steal away so was surely ungrateful. Her absence should have been a relief—he was inconsistently disappointed. Then he saw a piece of folded paper upon the table. He opened it and smiled. In plain, childish characters he read:—

My dear friend,—Thank you very, very much. I have slept well, and I do not want to bother you any more, so I have gone away quietly. I shall often think of this beautiful place, and good-bye.

MILLY WILSON.

He thrust it into his pocket, and then, without a

moment's hesitation, started swiftly for the road. He took a short cut, clambered over a stone wall. She was already in sight, walking with downcast head in the middle of the road. He stole near her on the grass border watching her gait. She limped slightly. There was a curious listlessness in her movements, not altogether, however, devoid of grace. He was almost at her side before the snapping of a dry twig betrayed him. She raised her head and looked at him startled.

"You're a nice guest," he exclaimed, "to steal away like this. What's the matter?"

She flushed almost painfully. He saw signs in her of a new nervousness.

"I left a note," she faltered. "I'm such a bother to you—and I didn't want to spoil your Sunday. I'm quite rested—I'll get on famous now!"

"You'll come back with me at once and have some breakfast," he said firmly. "The idea of starting for a nine-mile walk like this. You'd faint on the way."

"I thought maybe I'd get a drop of milk at Lingford," she said, hesitatingly, "and I think I'd better go."

"Just as you like," he answered, gruffly. "I don't want to keep you."

Her eyes filled with tears. His gruffness vanished.

"Better come back."

She yielded at once. They climbed the hill together. The sunlight streamed through the grey vaporous sky, and from a grassy field to their left a lark rose in little circles singing to the morning. Down the long, dusty road, with his feet up and a black bag in front, came

John Martinghoe on his way to an Early Celebration. He put on the brake when he saw Strone, and gazed with wonder at his companion.

"Good morning," he called out, and Strone returned his greeting shortly. Martinghoe looked back at the risk of falling, and his face was clouded.

"A stranger," he said. "Very likely a relation. I wish Strone hadn't glared at me so. Hang it, I wish I hadn't seen them."

He turned the corner, and rode on. He was a lover of strong men, and Strone, as a type, had fascinated him. He had no desire to see the feet of clay. He put the thought away from him.

Strone was singularly unversed in women's ways. He knew nothing of their tastes. He was shy and ill at ease under a mask of gruffness. Yet the day slipped on pleasantly enough. After breakfast they sat out on the hills, and what need was there of conversation? To her all things were new and wonderful—the soft, mossy turf, the cloud-speckled blue sky, the endless twittering of birds and chirping of insects against that background of marvellously deep silence. The west wind swept through the wood, and blew softly in their faces, almost it seemed like the murmur of a distant sea. They talked spasmodically. She told him the details of her dreary life simply and without bitterness—he was well able to appreciate the miseries she spoke of. The long hours, the routine work, the squalid slum in which she lived, the absolute hopelessness of any change. So her cramped girlhood must

pass into imperfect womanhood, physically and morally she must become in time ground into the likeness of those around her, a parasitical thing hanging on to the heart of the great city. A pity, he thought, raising himself upon his elbow, and looking thoughtfully at her. He, too, was of her class, but a man with brains, unhampered with family, a skilled workman. Opportunity had been his—in her position he, too, must have gone under—and she was certainly pretty. Every hour he was more sure of it. Intelligent, perhaps, receptive, without doubt, for in a vague sort of way these hill-top solitudes meant something more to her also than their mere external beauty. Yet he must let her go—back again into the pit. There was no way in which he could help her. Had she been of his sex he might have stretched out his hand, and pulled her up. But, then, he admitted swiftly to himself, that in that case she would have been of no interest to him. Strone had in those days much of the selfishness of the home-made man of culture. He kept his eyes from looking downwards and his heart from pity. He had worked out his own salvation—those who could must of themselves struggle upwards into the light. But with this girl it was different. He lay watching her—and thinking.

Often she irritated him—as when she spoke of her friends.

“Me and Charlie has been out in the country once or twice,” she said, “but it was never like this. There was generally a public-house where we went to, and Charlie was hard to move when he got inside.”

"And who," he asked, "is Charlie?"

"Well, I walk out with him sometimes," she answered, simply. "It ain't nothing really, but he's taken me to the theatre once or twice. He's real smart, is Charlie. He don't have to work like us, but he drives about in a trap, and sells things."

"Does he want to marry you?" Strone asked.

"No fear," she answered, bitterly. "I ain't near good enough for 'im!"

"If he makes you think so," Strone answered, with an energy which surprised himself, "he's a cad."

She shook her head doubtfully.

"His mother lives in a villa," she said, "and he wears kid gloves. He ain't my class."

Strone remained silent. He recognized the hopelessness of speech. A few hours, which at the most was all that remained of her visit, was too short a time for him to attempt to disturb the girl's whole outlook upon life. So he passed away from the fringe of graver subjects, told her of the birds who came hopping close around them, showed her the owl's nest in the eaves, and the pond alive with newts. He caught one deftly and showed her its brilliant orange chest. The day stole away; they had a frugal dinner and started to walk to Gascester.

At the bend of the hill she turned around to catch a last glimpse of the low-thatched roof and the grey smoke curling upwards. He was amazed to see that there were tears in her eyes.

"It has been such a nice day," she murmured. "I

shan't ever forget it. It's like—another world—out here."

So the husk of her materialism had been quickly pierced. A new warmth found its way into his manner. He was pleased to find that she possessed sensibility.

"You must come out and have tea with me again some time," he said.

"When?"

The single monosyllable, almost fiercely uttered, appealed to his sense of humour. He laughed heartily.

"You shall come one Sunday," he said.

"My married sister has a bicycle," she remarked. "I might get her to lend it to me."

He nodded.

"I have your address," he said. "I will write to you."

At Lingford a cheap little trap with yellow wheels and a dejected pony came rattling through the village. A young man in a light overcoat and cap, dissipated looking and pale, with a big cigar in his mouth, was driving, and by his side a girl in a ready-made tailor coat, a collar and tie, a heavy fringe, coarse-faced, bold-eyed. The young man waved his whip and saluted them with a laugh which was half a jeer.

"Wot ho, Milly!" he sung out. "Got a chap, eh?"

Strone's face darkened—a streak of colour flushed in the girl's cheeks.

"It's Charlie," she said, in an odd, smothered tone.

"She's the barmaid at the Peacock."

Strone made no remark. At the inn a brake was

preparing to start for Gascester. He paid sixpence for a seat and handed her up.

"Good-bye," he said.

She turned her head away. Her farewell was almost inaudible. The brake drove off, and Strone saw that she was crying.

CHAPTER V.

An odd restlessness crept into Strone's life during the next few days. To his amazement he found himself thinking more than once of his strange visitor during his long rides backwards and forwards to Gascester, and in the still nights when he wandered about his curious little domain, smoking and drinking in the sweet, clear air. He forgot her small "gaucheries," even "Charlie" ceased to irritate him. He remembered her pretty brown hair and eyes, her eager appreciation of his belongings, her immense awe of his knowledge of books and living things, that pleasant sense of companionship which somehow invested the memory of that day with a charm which he was wholly unable to account for. She was ignorant, a mere waif in that world within which Strone himself aspired to dwell. He was wholly unable to account for the fact that she did not slip easily out of his memory, an alien thing, kin to him only in her humanity. Surely it could not be her sex alone which kept alive recollections for the existence of which there could be no real reason. It was humiliating. He found himself reading poetry—more thrilled than ever he had been before by the wonderful Springtime. His work at Gascester fretted him. He grew silent and irritable.

One day the head of the firm sent for him. He

threaded his way through the works and presented himself in the private office, cap in hand. Mr. Dobell nodded pleasantly.

"Good morning, Strone," he said. "I hear that you are by way of being an inventor."

Strone's face was a study of impassiveness.

"I wasn't aware of it, sir," he answered.

Mr. Dobell smiled as one who knows.

"How do you spend your dinner hour as a rule?" he asked.

Strone shrugged his shoulders.

"I have a few ideas, now and then, sir," he answered. "I sometimes try to work them out, when everything is quiet in the yard."

"So I understand," Mr. Dobell remarked.

"They are scarcely inventions," Strone continued. "You might put them down as improvements. Where they have come to anything the firm has had the benefit."

"I am perfectly aware of it," Mr. Dobell answered. "Sit down, Strone."

Strone found a chair and drew it up to the desk.

"My desire is," Mr. Dobell said, "to offer you every encouragement. You are a valuable servant, and the firm realises it. I should like to possess your confidence. Am I not right in believing that you have something more extensive in your mind?"

"I am much obliged to you, Mr. Dobell," Strone said. "In a certain sense you are quite right. You will remember a man named Lansom?"

"Perfectly well," Mr. Dobell answered. "He spent

twenty years of his life trying to make what he called the 'Miracle Crane.' He took to drink in the end, and died in a hospital."

Strone nodded.

"He was an ill-balanced creature," he said, "but some of his ideas were good—very good indeed. I used to work next to him, and we talked a great deal about his scheme. He never perfected it—he never would have perfected it. All the same—I think that it can be done."

"I have worked at it myself," Mr. Dobell said, thoughtfully, "and I have come to utter grief. I got just far enough though to see that the thing was possible."

Strone smiled.

"Yes, it is possible," he repeated.

"What I want to say to you is this," Mr. Dobell continued. "There is every scope here for you if you should chance to succeed in putting the thing together. Don't leave us. If you have anything to offer we shan't rob you. If it's worth it—there's a partnership. I have no sons, as you know, and no one in particular to leave the business to. We don't want to grow fat on another man's brains, but the greatest invention in the world is of no use without capital. Go on working at it. You can have all the power you want, and all the material. If you make the Miracle Crane we'll set our capital against your ingenuity share and share alike."

Strone betrayed no elation, whatever he may have felt. He was looking past his employer out of the

high uncurtained window. His massive forehead was puckered into a frown. He was thoughtful.

"It's fair enough, sir," Strone answered. "There's only one thing. I think I can make it, and I'll not take it elsewhere without talking it over with you. But—"

"Out with it, Strone," Mr. Dobell said. "Let's talk this out like men. We'll understand one another, at any rate."

Strone nodded.

"Certainly, sir. I've a few ideas about labour and capital on which I am afraid we should split. I am not ambitious to make a fortune. I don't want to draw thousands a year myself and pay thirty shillings a week to my men. It isn't honest."

Mr. Dobell raised his eyebrows. A very faint smile flickered across his face. He had heard this sort of thing before.

"Why not? Brains must earn more than unskilled labour. You can't alter that."

"I can modify it, sir."

"Go ahead then."

Strone hesitated. He was not at a loss for words, but he knew his man. Mr. Dobell was honest enough, but he had prejudices.

"The whole thing, sir," he declared, "seems to depend entirely upon the point of view. You can't submit it satisfactorily to argument. I've a sort of creed—just a jumble of ideas, that's all. You might pulverise me logically, and next morning they'd all be there again."

Dobell leaned back in his chair. It was his policy to humour this man, and he prepared to be bored.

"Go on."

"I think that where we mostly go wrong, sir," Strone continued, "is that we are apt to be too self-centred. We look upon ourselves as separate and individual units instead of one infinitesimal part of a great humanity. Life's all framed that way. Everything encourages it. The struggle for existence, the desperate competition, our system of government, even the marriage laws. You see, life's a big thing, and an exciting thing. We're caught up in the maelstrom and we forget."

"But you must believe," Mr. Dobell said, "in the necessity for self-development."

"I believe self-development is our first duty," Strone answered firmly, "but as a means to an end—not an end in itself. Directly we've succeeded, our next duty is to give others a leg up. Even if I've got the brains, it's no particular credit to me. I am a selfish beast to squeeze the world dry whilst I fatten."

"This isn't argument," Mr. Dobell remarked.

"It's just one of those subjects you can't argue about," Strone admitted. "It's as though the cipher zero had stolen somewhere into all the formulæ which represent humanity. You can argue for ever, and you don't advance a step. It's a matter for individual sentiment. There may be another life and there may not, but I'm pretty sure I couldn't walk through the slums of Gascester and live myself in luxury. The difference between failure and success is generally oppor-

tunity. The man who succeeds mostly forgets this—the man who fails never.”

Mr. Dobell tapped upon the desk with his pencil.

“Now be practical, Strone. Show me how this is to affect my offer—to come between you and me. I’ve heard that you’re a Socialist. It doesn’t seem to me to be a logical state, but I’m open to conviction.”

Strone laughed pleasantly. He was beginning to like his employer. His cynicism was relieved by a touch of geniality—he, too, was a hater of humbug.

“I’m not a Socialist, sir,” he said. “I’m a firm believer in some of their broader principles, but you’re right when you say that it isn’t a logical state. That’s why I rather like Christianity. It pleads that we do as a favour what Socialism would like to convince us must be done as a law. If I were an employer I’d want to run my works on a profit-sharing basis, not nominally, you know—the real thing. I’d like my workpeople to get five pounds a week—enough to live in a clean neighbourhood, get out into the country on holidays, bring up their kids in a wholesome way. I’ve no delusions, sir. I should draw a bit more myself if it was to be made, and if I did I bet my most ignorant mechanic would grumble and call me names.”

They both laughed. Mr. Dobell rose.

“I hold you to your promise, Strone,” he said. “Come and see me if you succeed. Meanwhile, can I help?”

Strone hesitated.

“I’d like to leave a little earlier sometimes now we’re slack, sir,” he suggested.

Mr. Dobell nodded.

"You are your own master," he said, briefly. "You know what has to be done. Come when you like, and leave when you like. Money all right, eh?"

"I'm getting all I want, sir, thanks," Strone answered. "Good morning."

Strone made use of his increased liberty to leave early that evening, and on a sudden impulse altered his usual route. He had tea at a village inn, lit his pipe, and rode slowly along the hilly pine-fringed roads. He came at last to Bangton village, and turned by the church homewards. From the vicarage lawn Martinghoe espied him and shouted lustily:

"Hi, Strone! Come in, man! You're not going to pass my house, surely."

Strone dismounted and brought in his bicycle.

"I didn't know you lived here, Mr. Martinghoe," he said, with an admiring glance at the low grey stone house set against a background of dark cool shrubs.

"Leave your bicycle there," Martinghoe insisted. "I will show you my flowers, and you must have supper with me."

They walked about the pleasantly-perfumed gardens until the twilight deepened, and from the open French windows a rose-shaded lamp gleamed invitingly in the centre of a white tablecloth. A gong rang out—the vicar pulled himself up in the midst of a delightful argument on the influence of Ruskin as an apostle of the beautiful.

"Will you have a wash?" he asked.

Strone assented, and afterwards found his way into a low-ceilinged dining-room, quaint but charming. Then came a surprise.

Martinghoe advanced to meet him and laid his hand upon his shoulder.

"Strone," he said, "I must introduce you to my sister, Lady Malincourt."

There floated out from the rose-lit shadows of the room a woman such as Strone had never looked upon before. She was fair, and very tall; her dinner dress was of unrelieved black; upon a band of black velvet which encircled her long graceful neck gleamed a large, lustrous pearl. In her eyes there was an expression strange to Strone—the bored listlessness of a woman of the world. With a little inclination of the head she passed on to her seat at the table.

"I am not always a bachelor, you see," Martinghoe remarked, as the soup came in. "My sister has tired suddenly of the city of vanities, and has come here to rusticate."

"The city of vanities is—London?" Strone asked. She raised her eyelids.

"It is my brother's definition of a place which he will never visit," she remarked, in her soft, well-bred drawl. "Don't you think that he is very prejudiced, Mr. Strone?"

"I cannot tell," Strone answered, "for I have never been there."

A flicker of amazed interest struggled with the impassivity of her features.

"You have never been to London? You are not a foreigner?"

Strone looked up, and his eyes twinkled with amusement.

"I am even a greater stranger to London and your world, Lady Malingcourt, than a foreigner. I am a working engineer in Gascester, and I do not often get a holiday."

She laughed, very softly, very pleasantly.

"You are so much to be envied," she murmured. "The most delightful thing in the world is to have something to do."

"As, for instance?" Strone asked, sipping his claret with wonderful appreciation, considering that the wine was strange to him.

"Oh, I have made many attempts at energy—all failures," she answered. "I tried singing, but my master was so unreasonable; philanthropy, but it was so tiresome; racing, but I lost my money. I am really a most unfortunate person."

Whereupon, feeling that she had gracefully extricated herself from her "faux pas," Lady Malingcourt leaned back in her chair and left the conversation to the men. Through half-closed eyes she studied Strone marvelling at his attire—the contrast between it and his easy fluent speech, was a constant puzzle to her. Without the slightest awkwardness Strone gave many signs of being totally unused to any form of society. The small usages of the table he took to readily enough—when asparagus tongs were placed by his side he simply asked what they were for in the most

indifferent manner, and gravely accommodated himself to their use. Martinghoe was filled with admiration of the man! When he had pressed him to stay he had utterly forgotten the presence of his sister and the consequent alteration in his domestic arrangements. Strone, however, was neither flustered nor assertive. Encouraged to talk he talked, when opportunity came he was silent. Lady Malingcourt, who had been for some time silent, from sheer inability to grasp the situation, came back once more into the conversation. She, too, although she would not for the world have admitted it, was a well read and well-informed woman, and she felt a positive pleasure in breathing once more an atmosphere of intellectual controversy. It was the first of many such struggles between the two men representing in themselves and their two lives the real and the ideal—the one passionately religious, pleading ever for the Christian type as the penultimate ideal of civilisation; the other frankly Pagan, fashioning his models of worldly stuff, giving to them a reality and an actual vivid life by this selection of humanly beautiful materials, so carefully and deliberately chosen. They sat talking till Lady Malingcourt yawned, talked over their cigars in the garden till the yew tree shadows were black upon the lawn, talked till the eager words died away on Strone's lips and he stopped short, fascinated and amazed. Through the opened window came the first notes of a woman's song, and to Strone the air seemed suddenly sweet and vibrate with music. The song grew. Strone thought

that never before had he heard anything so beautiful. He was strangely, wonderfully thrilled. All his life his sense of beauty, keen enough, had most easily been reached by sound. The soft swelling of a west wind in the woods; the minor wailing of the night air in the pine grove which overhung his cottage; the singing of birds; even the chirping of insects—these things had represented a very high type of beauty to him. To-night, from the lips of this tired woman of fashion came to him a new wonder in life. His pulses quivered with the delight of it. When the song was finished there was a hoarseness in his throat—he was scarcely conscious of his whereabouts. Upon the threshold of the French windows she stood and looked listlessly out at them, her beautiful slim figure softly defined against the rose-shaded background, her bosom still rising and falling with the swell and triumph of that last wonderful note. For she had sung her best, and she knew it!

“I came hoping for applause,” she murmured, “and not a word from either of you.”

Strone moved out from the shadows. His face was unusually white, and his eyes were on fire.

“There is something better even than applause, Lady Malingcourt,” he said, “and which we offer only to the most beautiful things in life—and that is silence.”

Then he rode away with scarcely another word, and Lady Malingcourt laughed softly and was well pleased.

"Your working man," she said to her brother, "is not far from being a courtier."

He rode back in a dream, a wonderful dream, through which there seemed ever to beat upon his ears the throbbing refrain of the song which had found its way to his heart. And on his table he found in a bowl of water a bunch of dejected-looking wall-flowers and a scrap of a note underneath.

"We're on half-time at our shop, and I borrowed Nancy's bicikel and brought you these. They faded awful quick coming, but I think the water will revive them. I have waited two hours. I hope I shall meet you riding back.

P.S.—I won't have no more to do with Charlie."

He took the note with him out into the night and tore it up. Little white specks of paper fluttered ghostlike through the darkness.

CHAPTER VI.

It was in those days that Strone's ambition, kindled long enough ago, burst suddenly into full flame. He neglected his reading and his solitary country rambles for a spell of downright hard work. Many nights he remained at the works long after the workpeople had left, locked in his shed, with a single light burning,—labouring always at the same apparently confused collection of wheels and strangely shaped pieces of metal. His progress was slow, and a less forceful man would long ago have been discouraged. There was a point beyond which movement seemed impossible. Ever he was hammering away, as many others had done before him, at a problem which seemed insoluble. He rode backwards and forwards like a man in a dream. Ever those wheels seemed flying round before his eyes, and somewhere between them and the piston rod there was a link—but where? He told himself plainly that the thing was possible. Some day it would come to him. He had always told himself that. Only whereas a few months ago he had contemplated the end with a sort of leisurely curiosity, he felt himself impelled to work now with a feverish haste as though time had suddenly closed in upon him. Martinghoe found him dreaming on his rocks one Sunday, and was surprised at the warm welcome which awaited him. They had tea together and talked for a while. Strone asked

after Lady Malingcourt, and learned that she was spending a few days at a country house close at hand.

"My sister," Martinghoe said, "is a woman of a curious type. Before her marriage she was simple and wholesome minded enough, but society has done its best to spoil her. Her husband was very rich, and they used to entertain very largely. I am afraid that the simple things of life will never again content her, though just now she is certainly a little bored with existence generally. If she had married a politician or a diplomatist she might have made a name for herself. She has brains, but seems to find the labour of thought too arduous."

"Her husband has been dead for some years?" Strone asked.

Martinghoe nodded.

"Yes! He was an invalid from the day of their marriage. Beatrice has never been the same girl since. I should be sorry to call her heartless, but I am afraid she has imbibed a good deal of the selfishness of the world she professes herself weary of. What excellent tea, Strone. May I have some more?"

Incidentally Strone spoke of his finding Milly Wilson, of her life and the life of her class. Martinghoe listened with sympathy. He felt that the story was told him in the light of an explanation, but he never alluded to his surprise at that morning meeting. From the first he had great faith in the man.

"I do not think, Strone," he said, later on, "that women have ever occupied much of a place in your scheme of life."

"They have occupied no place at all," Strone answered. "I find plenty of sentiment in life apart from the sentiment of sex. Marriage is not a state for which I have the slightest sympathy."

"You may change," Martinghoe remarked. "You are young, and for good or for evil the woman has swayed the man throughout all time."

"You yourself—," Strone began.

"Should have been married long ago," Martinghoe interrupted, simply, "but the woman whom I loved—died."

Strone said nothing, but his silence was sympathetic.

"You are faithful then—to a memory," he murmured, after a long pause.

"It seems like that," Martinghoe admitted. "The fact is that I have never cared in the least for any other woman. I do not think, Strone, that a strong man ever cares for two women in his life."

And then they talked of other things. Strone spoke of his inventor's hopes, and Martinghoe was interested.

"Ambition is an angel's vice," he said. "Are you anxious for wealth, Strone?"

He shook his head.

"I would not accept it," he answered. "I want the power which wealth confers without the incubus or the disgrace of riches."

"Disgrace!"

Strone laughed.

"My socialism, you know. I would like the con-

trol of a large industrial undertaking, and I would like to have the framing and altering of many social laws."

"Parliament?" Martinghoe suggested.

"I suppose so," Strone admitted, without enthusiasm. "Not for its own sake though. In many ways life even now is very sweet to me, only it is so hard to understand—to know oneself. One goes jogging along—and then an upheaval. There comes a torrent of new emotions, new desires."

Martinghoe sighed.

"If only you had been granted the religious sense," he said, rising, "what a bishop you would have made. By-the-bye, I wonder would you mind my bringing my sister over one Saturday or Sunday? She is very curious to see your cottage."

Martinghoe was lighting his pipe, and the sudden flash in the other's dark eyes passed unnoticed. Strone's voice he was master of. It betrayed nothing.

"It will give me very much pleasure," he said. "When?"

"I won't say for certain," Martinghoe answered. "You see, Beatrice is fearfully capricious, and if I fixed a date and told her she certainly wouldn't come. We'll take you by surprise some day."

Strone's face fell, but he made no remark. At the gate he left Martinghoe, and by chance chose to return through the wood where he had met Milly Wilson and there to his amazement he found her once more, a shabby old bicycle by her side, reading diligently.

She sprang to her feet as he approached, the book

dropped from her hand. There was no doubt whatever as to her prettiness. The pink flush in her cheeks was charming. Strone, who had lately now and then developed strange fits of loneliness, was honestly glad to see her.

"Were you coming to see me?" he asked.

She shook her head shyly.

"No. I've been here lots of times lately. Louie—that's my other sister—she's bad, and I ride her bicycle."

"Thanks for the wallflowers," he said. "Will you come and have some tea?"

"May I?" she asked, eagerly. "I'd just love to!"

"Of course!"

He picked up her book. It was a little volume of Tennyson.

"Hullo! Are you taking to poetry?" he exclaimed.

She looked a trifle shamefaced.

"I wanted to read some of the books you read," she said, "and I saw this in your room."

He nodded approval.

"Stick to it," he advised. "I don't know that I'd start on Tennyson, though. Would you like me to lend you some books?"

"Would you—really?"

She was breathless. He took up her bicycle and carried it under his arm.

"Why not? I should be very selfish not to try and help you a bit. How are things at home now?"

"About the same," she answered, drearily. "Only father has had no money to get drunk with, and moth-

er's been in bed with pleurisy. I've been on short time too."

"How much do you earn?" he asked.

"Nearly sixteen shillings most weeks," she answered, with satisfaction. "I'm rather quick."

"And how much do your people get?" he asked.

She laughed bitterly.

"How much do you suppose? Every copper. I kept back two shillings for a pair of gloves last week, and father hit me."

Strone—so well acquainted with the class of home—was angry.

"The brute," he muttered. "Don't you sometimes feel like leaving them?"

"I can't do that," she answered, dolefully. "There are the kids—they'd starve but for my money. Father doesn't earn anything regular."

It was a very hard problem. He let it alone for the present, and gave her some tea, pulled down his books and talked pleasantly to her about them. She was not without a certain quick intelligence, and her memory was good. He packed up a few volumes and tied them to her bicycle.

"You must ride out again soon and change them," he said.

She looked at him eagerly.

"When?"

He hesitated. It was within his power to lighten a little the burden which lay upon her young shoulders. There was no one so far as she was concerned to object to her visits—he was quite sure of himself. And

yet a curious hesitation held him tongue-tied. It was as though someone had held up for a moment that impenetrable curtain of fate and the shadow of a warning had stolen out to mock him. He brushed it away. The girl caught his hand impulsively and her warm breath almost mingled with his.

"I may come?"

"Some Saturday or Sunday," he said. "I am always about then."

Her lips broke into a smile. She jumped lightly on her bicycle, and rode down the hill—carefully at first to avoid the brougham and pair which was leisurely ascending it. Strone watched the carriage also with surprise, for it was a rough road and seldom used.

It drew level with him, and he became aware of a brilliant vision, a Bond Street toilette, a woman fair and listless, leisurely extending a daintily shod foot to the step of the suddenly checked carriage. He was astonished to find himself the possessor of emotions more fierce and vivid than any he had ever imagined. He was suddenly shy and awkward.

She stepped across the road and held out a grey gloved hand.

"How do you do, Mr. Strone? Are we really anywhere near this wonderful cottage of yours?"

He pointed to where the smoke crept up behind the hillock.

"You are very near indeed, Lady Malingcourt," he said.

She paused. How stupid the man was, standing there like an owl.

"I am curious to see the outside," she said. "I cannot imagine what a home-made house looks like. It reminds one so much of the picture books of our youth. Can I see it from the other side of the field without climbing anything?"

Strone threw open the gate, and she passed through into the field, her grey skirt trailing with a silken rustle across the short green turf. She looked at him sideways languidly—how stupid the man was.

"I have been paying calls," she said, "a dreary ordeal in the country. People expect you to play croquet or smell flowers, and have tea out of doors. So extraordinary. Life seems made up of people who live in London and have houses in the country, or people who live in the country and have houses in London. Such a wonderful difference, isn't there?"

"I suppose so," he answered.

Then there was a short silence. It was an event, this, so bewildering, so unexpected, that Strone was unable to recover himself. A new shyness held him speechless. Lady Malingcourt, who was wondering if she rightly understood it, did nothing to help him.

"There was a young woman," she said, languidly, "who nearly ran into us, coasting at a ridiculous speed down the hill. Was it your sister?"

"I have not a relation in the world," he answered.

"Indeed!"

He felt, rather than saw, the slight upraising of her parasol, the quiet glance, which although not altogether inviting an explanation, at least permitted it.

"It is a young woman whom I found in the woods

here with a sprained ankle some weeks ago," he said. "She has ridden out to see me twice since. I am lending her some books. Her life is a most unfortunate one."

Lady Malingcourt yawned.

"How nice of you," she murmured. "I cannot imagine where your cottage is hidden. Is it much further?"

"You can see the outside from the gate here," he answered. "The approach is rather rough, but if you will allow me to assist you I can find an easy way down."

Lady Malingcourt looked downwards at the stony path, and decided that an exterior view would suffice. The appearance of the cottage perched upon a ledge of the grassy hill excited her admiration.

"How sweet," she exclaimed, "and what a delightful situation. I had no idea that there was such a view in the county."

"Few people have," he answered. "It is a little corner all to itself."

"And those beautiful grey stones," she asked, "where did they come from?"

"I collected them from the land round about," he answered. "Here and there I am afraid that I robbed a wall."

"It looks so cool," she remarked, "and the thatch is lovely. So this is the abode of a veritable hermit. You live here quite alone, do you not?"

"Absolutely!" he answered.

"You cook your own meals—do everything for yourself?"

"Why not? It is very simple!"

"You are one of those few people in the world, then," she said, "who are able to realise what absolute solitude is?"

"I have learnt to regard it," he admitted, "as a luxury jealously to be preserved."

"In the abstract," she murmured, "it must be delightful. Yet it always seems to me that solitude is for one's fine weather days. There must be times when companionship is a luxury."

"The right sort of companionship," he said. "Yes, I can understand that. I am not going to say that I have not known what it is to be lonely. But, then, I would rather a thousand times suffer the worst pangs of loneliness than have to submit to unwelcome companionship, wouldn't you?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"There are times," she admitted, "when I bore myself far more than any one else could bore me. You should select the companionship you prefer. Isn't that the easiest solution?"

He laughed hardly. There passed before him in swift mental review the men and women with whom consort would be possible if indeed companionship should become a necessity for him. The irony of the thing appealed to his sense of humour—always a little grim.

"That is the easiest solution," he said, "for those

who are in a position to choose. But, after all, I do not think that I am a companionable man."

"Really!"

She looked around to where the carriage was waiting.

"I must go," she said. "I'm so glad to have seen your cottage. Remember that John is bringing me to have tea with you one day. I shall look forward to it immensely."

"It will be a great pleasure to me," he said, in a low tone. "Your brother has been in this afternoon."

She began to retrace her steps. He kept by her side.

"I hope you sent him off in good time," she said. "I have promised to take him to Lingford Grange to dine to-night."

A sudden impulse prompted him to ask a question.

"Will you sing to them?"

She laughed.

"Oh, I don't know, I might if I were asked, but I fancy that they are all very keen on bridge just now."

"Do," he said, quickly.

She looked at him with raised eyebrows.

"Why? You will not be there, surely?"

He ignored the insolence of her question.

"If you mean that I shall not be one of Colonel Devenhill's guests—certainly not," he answered.

"Then I cannot see what difference my singing can make to you."

He smiled enigmatically.

"Nevertheless," he said, "if you are asked to sing I hope that you will."

She looked around her as he opened the gate. The silence of the approaching dusk seemed already to be hovering over the quiet country. A bat flew over their heads, and from a little way in the wood an owl called sleepily to his mate. She listened intently for a few minutes.

"After all," she said, "the country has charms. I think that I shall give up Homburg and inflict myself on John for the whole summer."

She raised her skirts and picked her way across the flint-covered road. The tall footman opened the door of the carriage, and she stepped inside.

"Well," she said, "do not forget that we are coming to have tea with you very soon."

She smiled at him, and leaned back amongst the cushions. Strone remained at the gate until the carriage was out of sight.

CHAPTER VII.

The man stood like a statue, half invisible amongst the shadows. Only his face, wrung with emotion, gleamed pale through the darkness. Out from the window, ablaze with much illumination, out into the cool still night came the wonderful music tugging at his heartstrings, sending the blood rushing through his veins at fever heat. He was no willing victim. When those first long sweet notes came quivering out he had made a quick movement backwards. He would not give himself over to this witchery, this most unholy bondage. He would seek safety in the woods, anywhere! But his feet were chained. He was a prisoner. The song swelled and the music grew, and with it his impotence. His passionate resistance melted away. He gave himself up to the wonderful sweetness of this new emotion. Then came the end—the dying away of that long sustained melodious note, the crash of chords on the piano, the buzz of applause, merging into conversation. And all these things Strone heard, or Lingford Grange with its magnificent front and groves of poplars stood with its back sheer upon a country road; and the newly built music room almost overhung the pathway. He heard, and he listened for more. They would make her sing again!

Soon a silence, the silence of expectation—a note or two upon the piano—and again her voice. More wonderful than ever. Seduction was blended now with mockery. A light laugh was followed by a burst of melody. It was a fantasy of music, elusive, capricious, delightful. Then a touch of passion, a full flood-tide of weird, heart shattering notes. It was surely the pleading of the lover—and once more the gay trill, the note of mockery. The song ended with the woman's laughter. Strone groaned where he stood, under the rustling leaves. It was like an omen, a chill forewarning of his own certain fate.

Shadows passed backwards and forwards across the window, and Strone waited, drunk for the moment with his stupendous folly. The memory of this thing which had come like a thief in the night, must ever linger with him—a shadow of shame in the future, a proof that even the sanest of men may drift with little warning into the kingdom of lunacy. Yet that night Strone was scarcely master of himself. The music had crept into his brain, a new force was alive within him. He stood there rigid, immoveable. "She will come to the window," he said to himself. And she came.

He knew her at once, as she came slowly into sight, leaning on the arm of Captain Devenhill. A diamond star burned in her hair, a great bunch of white roses were clustering loosely at her bosom. She walked straight to the window and looked out. The spirit of the song seemed still to linger in her face, her eyelids dropped a little, her lips were parted in the dain-

tiest of smiles! Against the lamp lit background she formed perhaps the fairest image of a woman Strone had ever gazed upon. Her bare arms and neck shone like alabaster, her black net gown glittered all over with some marvellous trimming traced in a strange design about her skirt. She stood there looking out, and Strone lifted his eyes to hers. It was like fire flashing through the summer darkness. Then he heard her voice.

"How delicious this air is. Could I trouble you to fetch my fan, Captain Devenhill! It is on the piano."

The man disappeared. Then Strone's heart throbbed. Though he dared not speak or move towards her it seemed to him that they were alone. He watched her breathlessly. A white jewelled hand played for a moment with the ornament which held her roses—then they came dropping into the darkness, a little shower of white blossoms. Almost immediately the young man rejoined her, the fan in his hand.

"Why, you have dropped your roses!" he exclaimed. "One moment."

He disappeared. With a single bound Strone cleared the road, picked up the roses one by one with hot, dry fingers, and regained his shelter with the echo of a woman's soft laugh ringing in his ears. Captain Devenhill came out through the stable gate, and strolled down the path, pausing for a moment to light a cigarette. When he reached the spot where the roses had lain he stopped short in amazement.

"Why, they are gone," he cried, looking upwards.

She leaned out of the window, and laughed down at him.

"Impossible," she declared. "Do, please, find them."

He poked about, looked up and down the road and swore very softly under his breath. Again she laughed, and the note of mockery was unmistakable. He looked up at the window.

"You have spirited them away," he declared. "There is something uncanny about it."

She nodded, and leaning down spoke to him softly.

"It was a ghost," she declared. "I was looking, and I saw a hand grab them. Do come up and take care of me. I do not like your country institutions, and I do not think that it was polite of your ghost to steal my roses."

"I'd punch the ghost's head if I could catch him," he muttered. "Lady Malingcourt, you are making fun of me."

She shook her head.

"I would not dare," she answered. "I do not know you well enough."

"In one moment, Lady Malingcourt."

He turned once more to the stable gate. A little white hand flashed imperiously out into the darkness. Strone stole away swiftly and silently. A minute later Captain Devenhill reappeared with a small army of dogs about him and a lantern. The woman sat in the window and laughed.

He chose a safe place and watched her go by an

hour or so later, leaning back in the carriage with half-closed eyes as though asleep, and a cloud of drooping white lace around her shoulders. It was only a glimpse. Then he lit his pipe and trudged homewards across the hills. With the grey dawn he turned upon his madness and fought it.

CHAPTER VIII.

Day by day he rode backwards and forwards from his hillside cottage to Gascester through the grey dawn and the white moonlight. Like a man at bay he fought his madness—he, the grimy mechanic in grease-stained clothing, who had drawn an evil poison into his veins. Heart and soul he flung himself with grim determination into his great work. The wheels of his models whirled and the great pistons throbbed with life. Out of chaos there resolved itself before him a problem to be solved—beyond was fortune immeasurable. So he toiled, not discouraged by many failures, grim and unswerving in his resolve to struggle through into the light. The days past—the nights alone were hard to bear.

Saturday came—enforced absence from the works—bringing rest which he feared, sunshine and a west wind, sweetest and strongest of tonics. Yet the thought of the long clear day's solitude within a few miles of Bangdon filled him at once with evil joy and passionate fear. He lay on the warm turf above the cottage all Saturday afternoon, smoking fiercely and reading Heine. Then a gate slammed. The book slipped from his fingers, he sat up listening, his heart beating thickly, his eyes ablaze. It was a woman who came into sight, but a woman in an ill-hanging skirt pushing a cheap bicycle, a woman hot and dusty with

riding. He ground his heel upon his feeling of sickly disappointment. This was better for him. He rose and went to meet her—took the bicycle, did his best to seem pleased.

"I didn't know whether I oughter come again so soon," she began, doubtfully, watching him with anxious eyes.

"I am glad to see you," he said. "Have you come for more books? See, I will put the kettle on."

He took it to the well and filled it, made up the fire and reached down some things from the cupboard. She watched him, drawing her gloves through her hand, anxious that he should notice that she had on a new hat. He looked at her furtively now and then, wondering whether white muslins and pink roses would have the power to transform her into a creature of that feminine world of which it seemed to him that there could be but one real habitant. Her thick stuff gown, her untidy skirt and pitifully cheap little hat. He looked them all over mercilessly. She felt vaguely that her appearance displeased him, yet he had seemed glad to see her. She made up her mind to believe he was glad. It had been so miserable a week—every morning she had woke up in her stuffy little room with only this thought to cheer her—that she was one day nearer Saturday. Much scheming—even a harmless little fib had gone to the buying of the new hat. She had earned it fairly enough. A record week's wages, a dizzy head, fingers and hands sore with labour. But her reward had come. She threw herself upon the turf by his side.

They talked very little. The birds were singing and the west wind blowing through the tree-tops. Below them a wide stretch of country, blue carpeted woods, brown and furrowed fields, fields green with sprouting corn. The girl spoke timidly of the books she had read,—he listened, blowing out dense clouds of tobacco smoke. She talked, and every now and then she sighed.

"It is so beautiful here," she murmured. "If only there was no going back."

He was silent. His eyes were fixed upon the tall chimneys and smoky clouds which hung over the city. The girl was picking grass and throwing it away. Her hand met his and sought his touch.

"If only he would kiss me," she thought. "If only he were like the others."

But in those days Strone had no thought of kissing her. In those days she did not even possess for him the mystery of sex. He was kind to her, but his kindness was born of an immense pity. He understood her life and the manner of it. He would have liked to have helped her, to have set her on her feet, to have seen her start the world under different auspices. So her hand rested upon his without any movement on his part. He ignored the fact that the tired, pretty face, with its wavy brown hair, showed a continual inclination to droop upon his shoulder. She wondered whether this were shyness or indifference. A little spoilt as regards her relations with her sex she elected to believe the former. She linked her arm in his boldly

—and Strone, so unused to anything of the sort, was embarrassed, and clumsily removed it.

She rose up at once.

“You don’t want me here any longer,” she said.
“I’m off.”

He stopped her.

“Why, what’s the matter, Milly?” he exclaimed.
“You have not had your tea yet.”

“I don’t want any tea.”

She stood with her back turned to him. He had an uncomfortable suspicion that she was crying.

“What nonsense,” he said. “Sit down while I see about it.”

“I don’t want any,” she repeated. “I’m sorry I came. I’m sorry I ever saw you. I’m off!”

She started down the turf walk, pushing her dusty old bicycle. Strone groaned to himself as he followed in pursuit. He caught her by the gate, touched her arm. She shook herself free.

“Let me be,” she said, keeping her face averted.

He saw the gleam of tears in her brown eyes, and felt himself a brute. Then somehow, he scarcely knew how it happened, his arm was around her waist and he had kissed her. After that there was no more talk of her going. She sobbed herself into an ecstasy. They returned together.

“I thought that you wanted me gone,” she said, in a broken tone, mopping her eyes with her handkerchief.
“I was so miserable.”

Strone was very uncomfortable. He almost wished that he had let her go. However, he made the best

of it, hurried on the tea and ignored sundry affectionate little overtures on her part. Afterwards he chose for his seat an isolated rock, and pointed out to her a place beneath. However, he couldn't avoid her resting her head upon his knee. She began to talk—volubly. It wasn't very interesting,—a long tirade,—a record of her woes, fascinating to him, for it was a page from the life of one of his kind. What a bringing up! A father who drank, a mother to be passed over in dark silence, a squalid home, children unwholesome and unmanageable. What a struggle for respectability, and what would be the end of it, he wondered, as the light grew dimmer, the evening insects buzzed around them, and far down in the valley little yellow dots of light leaped into life. Then he rose up, and she sadly followed his example.

"I suppose I must go," she said, doubtfully.

"I am quite sure of it, if you want to get home to-night," he answered. "I'll carry your bicycle to the gate, and light your lamp."

"Come a bit of the way with me," she begged.

He hesitated. It was hard for him to refuse so outspoken a request. She took his assent for granted.

"You needn't come far," she continued. "Just the corner of the lane. I'm not afraid, but it's awful lonesome amongst the trees."

He pushed the bicycle, and she held on to his arm. So they made their way down the white belt of dusty road, which midway down the hill seemed to disappear in the shadow of the overhanging trees. She stole closer to him, and her head leaned towards his.

"I'd be kind of frightened alone," she whispered.

Her breath fell warm upon his cheek, her lips willingly met his. He drew away breathless—suddenly sane.

"Milly," he said, "you'll remember what we've been talking about? You'll read the books and be brave?"

"Yes."

"Life isn't always black. There's a time when the clouds lift."

"When may I come again?" she asked, bluntly.

"Next Saturday, if you want to," he answered.

"Not Sunday!"

"I can't come on Sunday," she said. "My sister uses the bicycle then."

He was devoutly thankful to hear it. He took her hand gravely.

"Next Saturday, then, Milly. If I am not here you know where the key is. Stop and make yourself some tea."

"If you're away I'll wait," she answered. "I shan't want any tea."

He started her off, and trudged homeward with a sense of unaccountable relief. He felt stifled, vaguely troubled by the memory of the girl's white face and pleading brown eyes. Then a nightingale sang to him. At once his mind was swept bare of all such thoughts. Once more the pine and the clover scented air around him seemed quivering with strange and passionate music.

CHAPTER IX.

A handful of white roses, drooping, half-dead, yellow at the edges. The man looked at them with wistful fondness. In their next stage they would still be precious to him—yet with their passing life certain throbbing memories must grow fainter. They had lain against her bosom. They had come to him through the soft, sweet darkness, a spray of white fluttering blossom, and they had come of her own will. She was of another world—a world which he might gaze at but never hope to enter. Yet there had been a moment, a single pulsating moment, when he had snatched her flowers from the dust and pressed them to his lips, when all such barriers had seemed meaningless things, when he had felt strong enough to shatter at a blow every law and tradition which would hold them apart. A moment's madness only. Intermingled with his finer imaginative qualities was a robust vein of common-sense. He might permit himself the luxury of dreaming beautiful dreams, he did not yield to the folly of believing in the possibility of their fulfilment.

Later he hid the blossoms away, and for hours the sun and wind burned his face as he wandered over the hills and along the scant footpaths. Larks rose up and sang to him from the fallow, chaffinches twittered from the hedges, the sunlit air seemed alive with all

the fresh pure joy of springtime. And as he walked his heart grew lighter and his spirits rose. After all, it was fine to be alive, to hear the glad rustling of Nature waking from her winter's trance, to be kissed by the sun and caressed by the winds. So his eyes grew bright and his brow smooth. Those hard lines about his mouth relaxed. He walked with the easy swing of a man to whom the taste of life is good. Far down in the valley the church bells called to him. He sat on a gate and watched the little knots of people streaming through the churchyard to the grey stone church. Were they happier, he wondered, to whom life had no complex side, whose simple beliefs dwelt untroubled in their hearts, who passed calmly through life to a quiet death? Yet to him there could be no content of this sort, as he very well knew. For good or for evil, he was born to taste the fiercer joys or the fiercer sorrows of mankind. Those simple folk might be content with the series of abstractions which they termed life. Their pastoral joys were well enough—for him the cup of life must be filled with purple wine, must be drunk in deep, glorious draughts. There might be poison in the cup—yet he would drink. Those who would live must risk death.

A bicycle bell tinkled in the lane below. John Martinghoe's cheery voice called up to him.

"Wake up, you profane dreamer, and obey the church bells! Where are you wandering to?"

Strone laughed back, a man's laugh deep and bass.

"Over the face of the earth. I worship in a temple, you in a church. Go and preach to your slow-witted

farmers and their dense womenkind, and don't abuse me."

"You are a heathen," Martinghoe declared, solemnly. "Worse, you are a scoffer. If you go by the Vicarage, call and see my sister. She is deadly dull."

He rode off, and Strone set his face towards the village. The bell ceased. Once more that curious Sabbath stillness fell upon the land. In the village itself no one seemed astir. He passed through the long empty street—scarcely even a hamlet—a few grey stone houses clustering around the country lane. His footsteps grew slower. He was passing the tall hedge which sheltered the vicarage from the road. He reached the iron gate, looked eagerly upwards. There was no sign of anyone in the garden, or at the windows. One eager look and he was past. He walked on, only the life and spring had gone from his footsteps.

A little way up the road he found a sheltered gate and sat down, hidden in the dip of the hill. He took out his pipe, filled it leisurely, and began to smoke. A hedgeful of twittering birds noisily resented his coming. A plover rose with her strange cry from the field behind, and flew slowly over his head. He took no note of these things. A little volume of Matthew Arnold's poems remained undisturbed in his pocket. His own thoughts were running riot, not indeed in that pleasant picturesque fashion of ordinary rest days when they took flight in his lazy moments and led him into strange, untrodden worlds, into shadowy countries peopled by the great but unforgotten dead.

A fiercer mood was upon him to-day. A giant folly had sprung up like a weed in the man, and his hands upon his throat were nerveless and weak. It was the most beautiful thing the man had ever imagined. Its poison in his veins was like the wine of life, its murmurings in his ears music such as had stolen away the senses of gods. His lonely life, his innate worship of the beautiful had paved the way for such a catastrophe. The mechanic who lives the life of a poet usually has to suffer for it.

So Strone of course fulfilled his destiny—his destiny of that morning at least. He knocked the ashes from his pipe, strode down the hill, pushed open the vicarage gate, and walked up the drive as though his present object in life was to reach the house in the fewest possible number of paces. The front door stood wide open, the sunlight fell pleasantly upon the cool white stone hall. He paused upon the threshold, his hand upon the bell. The sweet scent of flowers came floating out from one of the rooms, a tall eight-day clock ticked solemnly. A black cat, lying on a Persian rug, surveyed him with lazy curiosity. On a chair was a red parasol and a pair of white gloves. Suddenly the swish of skirts. She came lazily through one of the open doors and paused in surprise at seeing him.

His boldness vanished. He was painfully red and shy. His address was abrupt, almost surly. He removed his cap awkwardly.

"I saw your brother," he said, "and there is a book I wanted—in the library."

She smiled faintly.

"Won't you come in and fetch it then?" she said. "The library is the second door on the left—over there. What a delicious morning."

She passed on, opened one of the doors on the other side of the hall and disappeared. He could scarcely believe his eyes when she vanished without a backward glance or word. He cursed himself for a clown. His clumsy shoes woke ugly echoes in the stone hall as he crossed to the library. He closed the door behind him. An oath ground its way through his teeth.

He selected a book at random and turned to go. On his way to the door he passed the vicar's writing table. There was a photograph of Lady Malincourt in Court dress. He stood looking at it—longer than he was aware of. A voice at his elbow made him start like a thief.

She had entered the room silently, and was herself regarding the picture with critical gaze. She nodded at it approvingly.

"I think I look rather nice there—don't you?" she asked.

"Yes!"

"Of course in your heart you disapprove," she went on. "John says that you are an out and out socialist. I don't quite know what it means, but I suppose if you lived in London you would stand on a tub in Hyde Park and make speeches to the people. You would say that the money that gown cost should have been spent in clothing the poor!"

"Indeed," he assured her, earnestly, "I am not so

bad as that. I am not a ranter. I suppose I'm what you call a socialist—but I'm not rabid."

"That is very comforting," she said, softly. "You look so hot and dusty. Come and sit under the cedar tree and tell me about your socialism."

So Strone passed into paradise, forgot his flannel shirt, his hard hands and his homely clothes. He sat on a stiff seat whilst she lounged cool and graceful in her white morning gown in the deep shade. She possessed the usual tact of a well bred woman. She encouraged him to talk, and he became at his ease. In a sense the man's sturdy eloquence fascinated her. Through all he said his passionate love of truth rang like a keynote. Rank was well enough, and wealth, but how immeasurably greater humanity! The inevitable crises of life must ever leave man and woman stripped of their trappings, children of the same family apart from each other only as they themselves had fashioned their inward life. He admitted that human laws necessitated wealth and poverty, the strong must flourish and the weak decay. He was not a vapourer, a Hyde Park orator. He had no hatred of wealth or rank—he hated only the falseness and humbug which raised the possessor of these above the heads of their less fortunate fellow-creatures, which reckoned these things sufficient without any account of the immeasurably greater things of life. To the woman it was like a very pleasant tonic. She was suffering from a surfeit of society, and this was a new and most delightful form of flattery. For she knew very well that the man was pleading his own cause—and altogether it

really was most picturesque. If only his hands had been nice and his clothes a little more decent. She kept these things in the foreground—all the time she had a faint mysterious consciousness that not one of those men of her own world who had tried their utmost to interest her had ever succeeded as this mechanic. They satisfied her taste, this man struck here and there a note so deep that she wholly failed to understand it. He demolished barriers in a manner that amazed her. He made her even forget his tie. She was absolutely free from any sense of danger. He admired her, of course, and his admiration gratified her. Beyond that was not her concern. She was used to having men in love with her, and they seemed to find a state of hopeless affection very pleasant. If it gave him too pleasure, she had not the slightest objection. In fact, she thought it very picturesque, though a little daring on his part; and daring is always so easy to forgive.

Strone, with instinctive tact, avoided, so far as possible, leading the conversation into personal channels. He was perfectly satisfied to be sitting by her side, to find her interested in that graver side of life, towards which their talk gradually drifted. Once more, in effect, he found himself pleading his own cause, pleading for the larger culture of the mind, as opposed to the culture of the body, the slighter graces and adornments of life. Her resistance, after all, was only feeble. She herself had come to Bangdon, suddenly weary of the deadly monotony of social life. She had told herself that it was only a phase, that a month's solitude in the

country was all she needed. And now, for the first time, she was half-inclined to doubt it. Vaguely she felt that the man's words were winged with truth, that she had neglected many things in life which seemed to her now both beautiful and desirable.

It was she, after all, who struck the personal note, and forced him to speak of himself.

"You make me feel terrible ignorant, Mr. Strone," she said. "When did you find time to read so much?"

He smiled.

"A man who has but few hobbies," he answered, "finds more time to indulge in them. I have never cared very much for anything else but books and the country. You see, I have had no distractions."

"You never cared for games or sport when you were younger?"

"I never had the money to indulge in them," he answered. "Books cost me nothing. The Gascester Free Library, as you know, is famous. Now that things are easier with me, I am too old to form new tastes."

She looked at him for a moment, and sighed. His clothes and tie were certainly hopeless.

"It seems odd," she said, "to think of you as a workman—that is what I suppose you would call yourself."

"It is what I certainly am," he answered.

She nodded.

"Let us continue to be mundane for a few minutes. I wonder, should you call yourself an ambitious man?"

"I have never desired to be rich," he answered. "Perhaps that is because until now I have not suffered for the want of anything which money could buy."

"It could buy you your liberty," she answered. "You could become your own master, travel when you liked, break off your associations with Gascester, which cannot be very pleasant for you. Surely this is worth considering!"

"In a sense, yes," he answered. "Yet my work in Gascester has taught me many things. It has shown me a side of life which I can never forget. It has helped me to understand the great social problems of the world as no one could upon whose back the scourge had never fallen."

"For the sake of the people whose cause you could plead," she said, "it seems to me that you should be ambitious. You do not intend to remain a mechanic all your days?"

"There is little fear of that," he answered. "I have other plans."

Unconsciously he straightened himself—a fire flashed in his eyes, his jaw was firm set. Lady Malingcourt looked away from him and sighed. Oh, for a man like this in her own circle.

"Would money help you?" she asked, carelessly.

"Not in the least," he answered. "My way is perfectly clear—and," he answered, with a suddenly swift glance at her, "my goal."

There was a moment's silence. It was not possible, she decided, that his presumption could be so great as to invest with any special meaning his last words.

Nevertheless, she kept her eyes withheld from his, and presently rose to her feet.

"I am so much obliged, to you," she said, "for keeping me company this morning. Will you stay and have some lunch?"

Strone declined, and she did not press it.

When Martinghoe returned from service he found his sister in a very good temper. She declared that she had spent a most delightful morning.

CHAPTER X.

"Your nice Robinson Crusoe has been here," Lady Malingcourt said, at luncheon. "I have had a most entertaining morning."

John Martinghoe smiled. He was very fond of his sister, although in many respects she was an enigma to him.

"I am glad to hear it," he said. "Strone is a wonderful chap, though I shouldn't have thought he would have interested you."

She sighed gently.

"You don't appreciate me, John," she said. "I am really most intellectual. Mr. Strone knows it. He said that he came for a book, but I am quite sure that he came to talk to me."

He laughed outright.

"Might one presume to enquire what you talked about?"

"Society, rank, wealth! He demolished them all. Humanity is the only thing in life worth considering. We should spend our life seeking for the truth. It is beautiful."

"And you," he asked, "are a convert?"

"I don't like the word, but of course I agreed with him. I have always thought so. That is why I came down here. I am convinced that society is thoroughly hollow. I may have had some faint doubts before. I

have none now. Robinson Crusoe has swept them away. We all ought to be more primitive."

"Why Robinson Crusoe?" he asked.

"Oh, doesn't he live in a hut he made himself, and throw stones at callers? I think that is so touching. By the bye, we are going to tea with him this afternoon. I promised."

"Not really?"

"He insisted, and I was only too glad. We must go!"

"You are sure he won't throw stones at us?" Martinghoe asked, lighting a cigarette.

"Certain. He approves of me very much. We are on excellent terms."

They strolled out into the garden. Martinghoe looked at his watch.

"I must be off to Sunday School directly," he said.

"Do you really mean that you are going to Strone's?"

"Is it very far?" she asked.

"Barely two miles, and a very pretty walk," he answered. "We must go if you promised. Oh, by the bye, Captain Devenhill said that he was coming over to tea."

"That decides it," she answered. "I am ready to start at any moment. I do not like Captain Devenhill, and I am always afraid that he is going to ask me to marry him."

Martinghoe threw away his cigarette.

"Devenhill is a very decent fellow," he remarked.

She looked at him from under the lace of her parasol.

"My dear John!" she exclaimed, reprovingly. "He would fall asleep after dinner, and go on the County Council. Oh, he is far too agricultural. Besides, he is younger than I am. If only you knew how young men bore me. What time shall we start?"

"I must go now," he answered. "Meet me at the Brocken Rock at half-past-three if you don't mind. Then we can take the footpath."

Lady Malingcourt went indoors and rang for her maid.

"I want the coolest walking dress I possess, a hat and some shoes," she said. "The simplest things you can find, Mathilde."

"Milady knows that it is very hot," the maid ventured to remark. Milady was well aware of it. She surprised Mathilde by starting out alone, and her brother by being punctual. They reached Strone's cottage a few minutes after four.

He received them out of doors. They sat down and admired the view. Lady Malingcourt drank some water from the well and found it delicious. Strone fidgeted about. He was, for the first few minutes, painfully shy.

"You would like your tea out here," he suggested to his guests. "It will be no trouble at all to bring it. I think that the kettle is boiling now."

Lady Malingcourt shook her head.

"I have come to see the inside of your cottage to-day," she said, smiling up at him. "We will have tea indoors."

"Wherever you like," he answered. "Only I am afraid you will find it very uncomfortable."

"Well, we will see," she answered. "I am going to look at your kettle myself. I cannot believe that a man really knows when it boils."

She rose and shook out her skirts. Strone threw open the door of his cottage, and they all entered. Lady Malingcourt exclaimed with delight:—

"How brutal of you, Mr. Strone, to have thought of making us have tea out in that glaring sun. This is delicious."

Strone coloured with pleasure. The interior of his little dwelling place was certainly at its best. The stone floor was as clean as much scrubbing could make it, the atmosphere was cool and sweet. A home-made oaken table stood near the window, and Strone's blue teapot and cups and saucers had cost him a week's wage. There were heaps of wild flowers in plain white bowls, homely enough, but of quaint design. A copper kettle was singing upon a small fire, the chairs were rush bottomed, of plain unvarnished wood and ecclesiastical shape, one wall was almost lined with books. Strone had a few good prints, which Martinghoe hastened to examine. Lady Malingcourt took off her hat and seated herself before the teapot.

"You were right about the kettle, Mr. Strone," she said. "It does boil. Please to pass it up, and I will make the tea—that is if you don't mind."

Strone obeyed—a little embarrassed, but with a curious sense of pleasure. Martinghoe laughed out loud. He had never seen his sister in this light.

"What dear little caddy," she murmured. "Mr. Strone, I never suspected it of you. You are quite an artist. And do you know, I had put you down as strictly utilitarian."

"I am afraid your first impressions were correct, Lady Malingcourt," he answered. "I am a very matter-of-fact person indeed."

"Will you tell me how it is then," she asked, "that you have not a single thing in the place which is not in harmony?"

"I think only by avoiding everything which could possibly have come from Birmingham," he said. "Nearly everything I made myself. The things I was obliged to buy I looked for at second-hand shops until I found what I wanted."

"You must be very clever with your hands!" she remarked. "What a lesson to you, John. My brother cannot even hang a picture decently," she added.

Strone smiled.

"You see, I am a real working man—a practical artisan," he said. "It is with my hands that I earn my living."

"Nearly all the working men I have known," she murmured, "have earned it with their tongue! But do tell me about your work, Mr. Strone. What do you make?"

"As a rule," he answered, "parts of machines. Just now I am working at something more important. I am trying my luck as an inventor."

She nodded.

"How interesting! What are you trying to invent? A new sort of machine?"

"I am trying to apply a well-known principle in a new way," he said. "I am trying to make a crane which shall do the work of ten of the machines in use to-day, or a hundred men."

The west wind rippled in through the window. She leaned back in her chair with an air of lazy enjoyment.

"Can you tell us a little about it?" she asked.

"I think so," he answered, "if it really interests you."

Lady Malingcourt was ready to be interested in anything. He fetched paper and a pencil, and drew for them on a simple scale a plan of the Miracle Crane. He worked it up to the crucial point and showed them the difficulty which had baffled all his predecessors.

"And you?" she asked.

"I shall make it," he answered, confidently. "It is a matter of a few weeks only."

Their eyes met for a moment, and his heart leaped. For the second time it seemed to him that the woman was awake in her—first, when those white roses had fallen to him through the darkness, and again now when his forceful confidence had kindled her admiration. After that he had no lack of words. He was eloquent enough about his scheme and its possible results. He spoke of the suspicion with which his fellow workers regarded him—even to-day new labour-saving machines were looked upon with hatred by the ordinary mechanic. He told them of Mr. Dobell's generous offer, touching lightly enough upon the great

change which success must make in his own future. For indeed he showed small sign of any personal ambition. The delight of the inventor overshadowed everything!

The time slipped away. Far away in the valley below a church bell startled Martinghoe. He sprang up.

"Time has flown!" he exclaimed. "I shall scarcely be in time for evening service. My friend Strone, you are a magician!"

She gave him her hand at parting. Her smile was pleasant, but she avoided his keen, eager gaze. As they passed out into the road, she looked thoughtfully behind.

"Robinson Crusoe is quite exhausting," she said. "What energy!"

"He is a type of one of the greatest forces in the world," her brother answered. "I may be mistaken, but I think we shall hear much of Enoch Strone."

And Strone watched them from his gate till they disappeared, wandered about amongst the fragments of their feast, sat where she had sat. Henceforth his little corner of the earth was haunted.

CHAPTER XI.

It was knocking off time at Dobell's works. The whistle had sounded, streams of grimy looking men were passing out through the broad gates. Strone remained in his shed, where he had been locked in for hours. He was pale and fagged, but he stood motionless, watching a strange collection of revolving wheels. A tap at the door—unnoticed. Another, and he threw it open.

Three men stood there. Strone looked them over.

"What is it, Haynes?" he asked. "I am busy."

The spokesman stood forward.

"Me and the mates," he said, "have a word or two to say to you about this 'ere."

He pointed to the model. Strone covered it with his body.

"Well?"

"There's a deal o' talk aboutt what you're up to. The gaffer don't send you out on contract jobs now. The lads kind o' reckon you're on the Miracle Crane."

"Well?"

"Going to do the work of a hundred men, ain't it?"

"I reckon so," Strone answered.

"That means a hundred men from here and everywhere the Miracle Crane goes will be chucked."

"For the moment—perhaps."

"Well, we'd just as lief that crane wasn't made," Haynes said, doggedly.

"Why? The Union don't object."

"The Union can't," Haynes answered. "All the same, we reckon we've got enough machinery running."

"That seems to be where we differ," Strone answered. "If that's all you've got to say, I wish you'd sling your hooks. I'm busy."

"It ain't all," Haynes answered, pugnaciously. "We've nothing against you. You're a decent sort o' chap for all we know, and we wish you no harm. But the lads a' kind o' got their backs up about that machine. You'd best let it drop."

"I shall do nothing of the sort," Strone answered. "I shall make the machine."

There was an awkward silence. Then Haynes stood out pugnaciously.

"Well, we say as you shan't," he declared. "You'd best take a hint."

Strone laughed contemptuously.

"You are ignorant fellows," he said. "Machinery is for your ultimate good—for all our good. Eighty or a hundred men may suffer for the moment, but thousands all over the world will be the better in the end."

"We don't see it," Haynes answered, "and, anyhow, those eighty or a hundred are our pals, and we ain't going to see them starve. We're here to warn you. That's all."

"Then you can be off again," Strone answered.
"I've said all I'm going to."

"You'd best think it over."

"I shall make the crane if I can," Strone answered,
"and I believe that I can. I've no more to say."

The men looked round. The pile of offices was still lit up, and the watchman was strolling round. They backed out.

"You're warned, Strone," Haynes said, solemnly.
"Maybe you'll think better of it."

"I'm not a fool," Strone answered, "and if any of you lay hands on me or my machine, I'll shoot you like a dog. See!"

A small revolver flashed out in his hand. The men retreated without a word. Strone locked the door.

For an hour he stood almost motionless, watching a certain part of the whirling mass before him. Then he called the watchman to him.

"Neils," he said, "just stay here till I return, and don't let any one enter the shed. I'm going up to speak to the boss."

The man nodded. Strone made his way across the yard and into the offices. Mr. Dobell was preparing to leave. He called Strone inside his room at once.

"Well?"

"I shall do it, sir," Strone said, quietly. "There's a little trouble with the men."

Mr. Dobell laughed.

"Nothing serious, I hope."

"I've had three of them in to see me," Strone said.
"They've had a bit of a meeting, and they've got an

idea that the crane will mean the sack for a lot of them."

"Did they threaten you?"

"Something of the sort, sir."

Mr. Dobell smiled grimly.

"These are the men whom you want to make masters of, Strone. Pretty sort of fellows, aren't they?"

"It's not their fault," Strone answered. "There's not much manhood in them, that's a fact, but I'm not sure that I wonder at it. They're just ignorant. Still, there must be a beginning. The next generation will reap the benefit. These men haven't had a chance. They're not much better than cattle. But that's neither here nor there. A maniac can kill an emperor, and I want to finish my work."

Mr. Dobell nodded.

"I will send you wherever you like," he said. "You have a free hand. You can finish in London, or on the Continent. Only say the word."

Strone laughed.

"I'm too near the end for that to be necessary, sir," he answered. "In fact, I don't require power any more. I was thinking I could finish at home better than anywhere. All I want is quiet and a bit of stuff—not half a cart load. Give me a week off, and say I've gone to Newcastle. We could get a cart at once and escape trouble that way."

"You are sure you won't want power?" Mr. Dobell asked.

Strone was certain of it.

"I've just got to think," he said, "that's all. It'll come directly."

Mr. Dobell nodded.

"Will you have my carriage to take you home?" he asked. "You look tired out."

Strone smiled.

"Nothing rests me so much as the ride home, sir," he answered. "I'll be there before the cart, and get a place ready."

"And when shall we hear from you again, Strone?"

"In about a week, sir."

"Our understanding remains. You will come to me," Mr. Dobell asked anxiously.

"Certainly, sir."

Strone rode out into the night, elated, wonderfully light-hearted. Now at last he felt sure of himself. His one remaining difficulty had vanished. In a week at the most he would be ready for modelling and the Patent Offices. His trouble with the workpeople scarcely seemed to him worth consideration. It would pass away directly his schemes were more widely known. How cool the air was, how sweet the night wind. As he passed the outskirts of the town a fancy seized him to ride round by Bangdon. He stayed at an inn, drank home-brewed beer, and ate some bread and cheese. Then he lit his pipe and rode rapidly through the country lanes, odorous with honey-suckle, and here and there with new-mown hay. Bangdon was all asleep, but the Vicarage was a blaze of light. He leaned his bicycle against the wall and crept as near as he dared to the house. A party of six were still

seated around the dinner table. Facing him was Lady Malingcourt, on either side men whose faces he knew well, one the county Member, the other Captain Devenhill. They were both good-looking, both irreproachably dressed, both apparently doing their best to entertain her. She leaned first to one, then to the other. She did not seem in the least bored. Once she leaned back in her chair and laughed unreservedly. As he watched, his face darkened. The rose-shaded lamps, the flowers, the men and women themselves, formed a vignette delightful enough in itself, peculiarly displeasing to him. This was her world, and she was very much at home in it. One might as well think of transplanting a star from the skies as of placing such a woman within his reach. He mounted his bicycle and rode slowly homewards. For days the memory of those few moments was a torment to him.

CHAPTER XII.

Saturday afternoon. Once more the slam of the gate, the sound of footsteps up the rough path. But this time Strone was deaf to fears or hopes—drunk with the fever of invention, face to face with that single elusive problem. She leaned her bicycle against the side of the house, and looked around for him—unsuccessfully at first. Then she heard footsteps, a muttering, a smothered oath. He was walking up and down by the woodshed, his hands behind his back, talking disconnectedly to himself, looking every now and then fixedly at a queer little model which he had constructed close to the wall. She peered round the corner of the cottage, half alarmed, half inquisitive. She had thrown aside her hat, and the wind-tossed brown hair was waving about her head, her cheeks were flushed—she was distinctly pretty. Strone, seeing her, stopped suddenly short. Then he came slowly towards her.

“Why, child,” he exclaimed. “Where did you come from? What are you doing here?”

“It is Saturday,” she pouted. “Weren’t you expecting me? You told me that I could come.”

“Saturday.” He passed his hand over his forehead. He had lost all count of days. He came slowly back to the present, laughed softly—the madness died out of his over-bright eyes.

"That's all right," he said. "Saturday, is it? I'm glad you've come."

He walked by her side to the front, sank down on his favorite moss-grown seat, and turned very white.

"Child," he said, "I never went to bed last night, and I feel queer. Make me some tea."

She threw off her jacket, turned up her sleeves, and was instantly in her element. She made him drink some milk while the tea was preparing, and fetched out some cold things from the larder. He revived speedily. They drank tea together, and he was very grateful.

"I have been trying to finish some work," he said as they sat watching the sunset an hour later. "It is very important and very absorbing. I had lost all count of time. I should probably have gone on until I was ill. All the while my brain was getting clogged. I am very glad you came."

She coloured up with pleasure.

"I have thought of nothing else all the week," she said, simply.

He looked at her and sighed.

"That's foolish of you," he said.

"Why?"

"Well, supposing I went away?"

"But you are not going away?"

He filled his pipe slowly—the first for two days. He was conscious of an aching in all his limbs—an intense weariness.

"I don't know," he said. "I might go abroad any day."

Her eyes filled with tears, her face was white with alarm. Suddenly she threw her arms around his neck.

"Don't go," she sobbed, "don't go! I couldn't bear it! I'd just as lief die then as not!"

He was taken by surprise, passive through sheer bewilderment. Her soft cheek was pressed upon his, her lips touched his forehead.

"I have nothing else in the world to look forward to but coming here," she muttered, brokenly. "At home it gets worse and worse. It is like hell. Father was locked up Tuesday night, and mother never came home. I've had to do for the children all the week, and work overtime. Sometimes I think they hate me because I try to keep straight—they'd like me to be as they are. Please don't talk about going away, Mr. Strone. I couldn't bear it!"

He raised her gently. He was very sorry for her indeed, and his tone was almost tender.

"My dear girl," he said, "please listen to me. So long as I am here you can come out every Saturday if you like, if it really helps you. I may be going away soon, but not just yet at any rate."

She was comforted, but his unresponsiveness vexed her. She was aching for his caresses, for a single note of endearment in his tone. He could have beaten her afterwards if only he would have smoothed her hair, kissed her once, passed his arm around her waist. But Strone did none of these things, though the light in her eyes was very eloquent. She was pretty enough, and his lonely life had made him to a certain extent susceptible to the charm of her close

presence, and half shy endearments. But with his return to mundane things the old madness was singing once more in his heart and through his blood. He drew away from her quietly.

"I wish," he said, "I could help you more permanently. I can't. You've got your work to do in life, and I've got mine. You've got, as you said just now, to keep straight. It's hard work, but you'll do it. Life's an ugly sort of thing when we're on the downward slope. Come into the wood, and I'll show you a wren's nest. Then you must be off. I've more work to do."

She followed him with dull footsteps.

"Life's a cold sort of place when there's no one cares a snap of the fingers for you," she said. "I don't see as it matters much what becomes of me."

"Life seems very hard to all of us now and then," he answered, evasively. "We all have our bad streaks. You're in one now. Never mind! I always believe that life's arranged on the balancing system. You'll have your good time some day. There! Put your hand in and feel."

"Why, I can't get more than a finger in," she exclaimed.

"It's a tiny nest, isn't it?" he answered. "The young 'uns only flew a week or so ago. Listen."

A bird's long sweetly drawn out note rang softly through the silent wood. They held their breaths. Strone raised his finger.

"A nightingale," he murmured. "Lean against the gate."

The nightingale sang to them, and the man and woman stood side by side. Around them save for that sweet, sad song was an unbroken silence. She crept closer to him. Her eyes were beautifully eloquent. In the half lights the poorness of her ill-made clothes, her pitiful little attempts at attractiveness seemed to fade away. Only the girl herself, with her pale, passionate face, crept closer and closer to him. He was her one hope, her single chance of deliverance. If only she could penetrate for one moment the mask of his kindly indifference. Her eyes sought for his wistfully. Speechless, she still pleaded with him, the song of the bird was hers. She, too, was lonely, heart-weary.

She began to cry softly. He felt a little cold hand steal into his. She stole closer to him, and her head drooped upon his shoulder. He turned round with a start, and her heart sank like lead. There was no possibility of mistaking what she read in his face. She knew that his thoughts had been far away.

"I am going!" she faltered, and would have crept away, but that he caught her by the arm.

"Don't hurry," he said. "There will be a moon presently. Besides, you must have some supper."

"I don't want any supper," she answered, struggling with a great lump in her throat. "I want to go away—at once. Let me go!"

"But, my dear child, why do you look at me like that?" he exclaimed. "What have I done to vex you?"

She broke away, and hurried towards the cottage. He followed, but kept up with her with difficulty.

"It is getting dark," he said. "Would you like me to ride some of the way with you?"

"No! Give me my bicycle, please."

He frowned at her.

"Don't be a silly child," he said. "What have I done to offend you?"

"Nothing!"

"When will you come out and see me again, then?"

She broke down. A flood of tears streamed down her face. Her slight frame was shaken with sobs. She dabbed her eyes with a worn and wholly inefficient pocket-handkerchief. Strone stood by, awkward and perplexed.

"Won't you tell me what is the matter, Milly?" he asked. "Is there any fresh trouble you haven't told me of?"

She straightened herself, and looked at him with eyes dilated—pale and ghostlike.

"No! Only I'm not coming here again. You don't want me. I'm only in the way of your thoughts about somebody or something else. I have been very foolish to come at all."

"You are foolish now to go away like this," he said.

"You don't care!"

"Of course I do!"

She clung hard even to a forlorn hope. She leaned over her bicycle. Her face softened, her eyes besought him.

"You don't meant it. You were thinking just then of someone else. You started when I spoke to you."

He told a white lie, impelled to it by the pity which was in his heart.

"For a week," he said, "I have been working practically day and night—only a few hours ago I found what I wanted. Can you wonder that I am scarcely master of my thoughts."

She was only half convinced, but she was very willing to believe him.

"But you don't care—a little bit—about me!" she said, softly. "You can't."

"Why not?"

She held up her face to him. Her lips seemed to seek his, her eyes were faint with the desire for even a single tender word.

"If you cared," she said, breathlessly, "you would kiss me."

He touched her very gently, and, stooping down, kissed her forehead.

"Milly," he said, "if you mean care for you—in that way—you are quite right. I want to be your friend, and help you all I can. But you must not expect from me more than I have to give."

She shivered a little, as though with the cold. The tears seemed dried in her eyes. Slowly she withdrew her hands.

"Now come in and have some supper," he said. "I will light a fire, and ride home with you afterwards."

"I am going," she said. "Good-bye!"

"Milly! You are unreasonable!" he protested.

She looked at him with a wan little smile. Then she pushed through the gate, set her lips tightly, and jumped on to her bicycle.

"Good-bye!" she said.

He let her go—it was best. She rode away, a dim, pitiful figure, into the deep shadows of the overhanging trees. Her head was bent, she did not look round. Strone lingered by the gate, and presently the nightingale sang to him again.

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CHAPTER XIII.

The three men sat side by side upon the wooden bench in stolid and evil silence. There was Syd King, a ranting pot-house orator, Haynes, and Dobson, a heavy-browed, thick-necked mechanic. The landlord didn't like the look of them, and his other customers seemed to prefer a distant seat. But they drank freely and paid for what they had, so their presence remained unchallenged. Yet they were an ugly trio.

The afternoon wore into evening. There was a purple flush on Dobson's face, an ugly glare in Syd King's eyes. Haynes put down his glass unsteadily.

"Enough, boys," he cried. "To work."

They rose and passed unregretted out into the cool, sweet evening. Syd King stood blinking for several moments. Haynes was trying to light a cigar with a match held several inches away from the end. They climbed into a little pony trap, and Dobson seized the reins. With a burst of foul language they drove off. The place seemed the purer for their going.

Away from the inn their tongues were relaxed. They left the main road and began to climb a steep country lane.

"Wot I want to know is this," Dobson began. "How far are your chaps going? He'll be awkward."

King drew in his breath with the hiss of a wild cat.

"There's plenty of us, eh?" he asked. "I'd treat

him as Pinner's boys did Dave Hare. That's the way to settle such as 'im. Once for all, I say!"

There was a short, grim silence. Then they flogged the pony until it broke into a shambling trot. Dobson pointed with his whip.

"It's behind that hill," he said, "quietest spot round about here. There'll be no one to hear him squeal if so be as 'ees troublesome. Hand us a jimmy, King. We'll take one apiece afore we forget."

King handled his own lovingly, an ugly murderous-looking weapon.

"Better'n shooters," he murmured. "More quiet like, and yer can't miss. How much further, Jo?"

"'Arf a mile," Dobson answered. "We'll hitch the pony to the gate up on the hill there. Let's 'ope he's got some liquor in the 'ouse. It'll be dry work arguing."

"Shut up, now," King growled. "It's so blooming quiet, 'ere, yer can 'ear for miles. We ain't none so far off either."

The little trap crept up the steep hill, the harness creaking, the pony distressed. Haynes lit a pipe with trembling fingers, and Dobson picked a handful of bracken and waved it to keep off the flies. An ominous silence had fallen upon them. The end of their journey was at hand.

Strone lay on the short turf, smoking quietly, looking out upon the glimmering world with new eyes. Sphinx-like he gazed with an impassivity somewhat to be wondered at, for an hour ago he had finished his

task. Those silent days, those long spells of work when day had become fused into night, and night into day, had left their mark upon him. His face was thinner, his eyes almost brilliant, a slight feverishness had flushed his cheeks. The man's sense of power had grown and deepened. For he had faced great problems, and he had bent great forces to his will. He had succeeded where other men had failed.

He looked out into the world and tried to apprise himself rightly. He wanted to know where he stood. There was a place which he could claim. Where? How high up, how low down? How far could wealth take him? What was the value of his brains in the world's esteem? He tried to reckon these things up, and he found it difficult. It was a kaleidoscopic misty wilderness into which he looked. He was trying to deal with his future from a wholly new point of view, and felt very much at sea.

Those moments of introspective thought became moments of self-confession. He realised and admitted the change in himself. The old ideals were unshaken, but they no longer had paramount sway. The gift of his brains to humanity, the betterment of his fellows, the inauguration of certain carefully conceived labour schemes no longer appealed to him with that wonderful enthusiasm which seemed to have almost sanctified his work. They were still dear to him, the end and aim of his practical efforts, but they were no longer all controlling. A new thing had come to him, a new emotion, quickening, irresistible, delirious! He was no longer completely master of himself—a stray

memory could set his heart thumping, could scatter his thoughts to the four winds of Heaven. A touch of madness this yet sweeter even than his sense of triumph. Such madness too! What had he, Enoch Strone, to do with fair women and white roses, though the woman had smiled for a moment upon him, and the perfume of the roses still hung about his little room. Yet—wealth was transfiguring—omnipotent. The words were her own. And in his hand was the golden key.

Martinghoe passed by, clanging his bicycle bell, saw him from the road, and promptly dismounted.

"I'm coming in for a drink, Strone," he called out. "This hill gets steeper, or old age is upon me."

Strone walked to meet him.

"The wind is against you," he said. "Come in!"

They sat together for a few moments, and Martinghoe lit a pipe whilst he sipped his whisky and water.

"You are idle to-night," he remarked, looking around. "No books, no modelling."

Strone took his pipe from his mouth.

"Idle," he answered, "because my work is done."

Martinghoe nodded quickly, looked a question which Strone answered.

"Behind there," he said, jerking his heads towards the shed, "is the fulfilment of many years' work. I have committed a sin. I am an inventor. Martinghoe, listen! I have made a miracle crane. It will do the work of a hundred men—all the lifting machinery of the world will be affected. It is the triumph of man's ingenuity over matter."

He broke off silently. Martinghoe was fascinated by the simple directness of his speech.

"Bravo!" he exclaimed. "I congratulate you. You are one of the world's benefactors."

Strone's face darkened.

"I don't believe that," he said, shortly. "It's an odd thing, Nature has made me an inventor against my own convictions. I hate machinery."

Martinghoe looked up puzzled, waiting for an explanation.

"Sometimes I believe that machinery has been the greatest curse ever let loose upon the class to which I belong," he continued. "It sounds rot, but it isn't. Machinery has done away with the craftsman, it has made a brainless parasite of the working man. It's right enough! I mean it. There are a few trades yet where machinery isn't employed. I'll wager what you like that the workmen who toil with their hands and are direct producers even of parts are a grade at least higher than the operator on a machine. Watch 'em stream out of the great factories in Gascester—a brutal mob of dirty, unsexed-looking creatures with dull eyes and low foreheads. It's the brainless mechanical work which has dulled the man in them. Machinery's made units of them, crushed their individuality. Every generation will be worse. We shall end with a race of parasites little better than a horde of monkeys. God! I believe I'd do well to smash my machine into a thousand pieces!"

"You forget," Martinghoe said, a little staggered

at this sudden outburst, "that machinery has cheapened the production of nearly every staple article. The whole world reaps the benefit of that."

"Claptrap," Strone answered. "The world's flooded with cheap ugly things which debauch our taste, and are generally useless. Tables and chairs with legs that tumble off, cheap and pretentious, boots made of brown paper, and clothes which fall into rags after an honest day's work. These things are cheap enough in money, but the souls of millions of our fellow creatures are in the balance against their cheapness. I tell you that if my invention were not pure engineering I'd break it up this moment."

Martinghoe rose reluctantly.

"You're a queer chap," he declared. "Come and smoke a pipe with me to-morrow. I must be off now. By-the-bye, you haven't seen my sister, have you?"

"Not this evening," Strone answered. "Is she driving?"

"Riding. It's late for her, but she's been a long way, and she's certain to have company. Good night, Strone. See you to-morrow, I hope."

He passed briskly away, mounted his bicycle, and rode off. Strone returned to his cottage—to find the door of his shed open and the shadow of a man lurking behind it. He advanced quickly. As he passed the angle of the cottage Syd King, with parted teeth and the grin of a wild cat, leaped stealthily out. Something dull and black sang through the air—a sickening crash. With uplifted arms and a loud cry, Strone

reeled and fell backwards. The three men bent over him. Haynes trembling violently, the other two with black, murderous looks.

"You've killed him," the former muttered.

"Good job, too," Dobson muttered.

CHAPTER XIV.

A blow which would have killed a man of ordinary strength kept Strone senseless for about ten minutes. At the end of that time he sat up and gasped. Recollection came to him but slowly. Something had happened! Then Haynes and Dobson staggered out of the shed carrying something, which they set down heavily. It was his model.

"Let that be!" he called out.

He was surprised at the weakness of his own voice. It seemed to him to come from a great distance. It had a surprising effect upon the two men, however, who dropped their burden and faced him hurriedly. Dobson advanced a step or two.

"What, ain't you had enough?" he exclaimed, savagely. "I'll soon settle you."

Strone struggled to rise—unsuccessfully. The trees and his cottage seemed spinning round, the earth gave way under his feet. Dobson bent over him, his face aflame, murder in his eyes.

"We'd better settle 'im, you chaps. We can't have him coming round and peaching on us. Ah, would you!"

Dobson dodged a weak blow which Strone aimed at him, and raised his hand to strike. Then the ground seemed suddenly to shake with the thunder of a horse's

hoofs. Lady Malingcourt reined in her great bay a few paces off.

"What is the matter, Mr. Strone?" she asked, in a clear tone. "Are these men robbing you?"

Her tone was like an electric thrill to Strone. He turned and faced her with blank white face. She sat easily on her horse, unmoved, but with a curious little flash in her eyes.

"Never mind—me, Lady Malingcourt," he faltered. "Please get away—quickly. They're mad—or drunk—or both. Send—someone down if you will!"

She faced Dobson.

"You were going to strike him," she said. "You great coward."

The men, stricken dumb by the suddenness of her coming, began to recover. Syd King picked up something from the ground and sidled towards her.

"Coward, am I?" Dobson muttered, thickly. "Let him get up and fight like a man then."

She laughed scornfully.

"Likely enough, when you strike him from behind," she said. "Let him alone, and be off."

Dobson staggered towards her with an ugly smile.

"We've a bit of business to settle first with him, my fine lady," he said. "We've no objection to your staying, though—we'll be glad of your company by and bye, eh lads? What do you say, my dear? Will you get down and spend a bit o' time with us, eh? There's a drop of Strone's whisky left. Come on, King. We'll have her down."

They made a clumsy rush towards her—and pande-



“They made a clumsy rush towards her.” *Page 110.*

10

monium followed. Lady Malingcourt's spur and whip, freely used, converted a highly strung and none too good-tempered horse into a mad creature. She rode at them like a whirlwind. Dobson, who caught at her rein, she struck across the face, and as he reeled she rode him down. King was kicked in the chest in a sudden backward plunge, and lay on the ground moaning. Haynes turned and ran for his life to the wood. All the time she sat her horse with perfect confidence, her cheeks pale, her lips indrawn, but perfectly cool. The animal plunged and kicked for several moments. She patted his neck and spoke soothingly to him. Presently he was quiet, although he still trembled, and his satin-like side heaved. She rode over to Strone.

"Are you badly hurt?" she asked. "What is it all about?"

Strone was an ugly sight, for the blood was streaming down from a wound in his temple.

"I shall be all right—directly," he said. "It's the miracle crane they came to smash—and me too."

He pointed to the model, which remained untouched. She nodded with quick apprehension.

"I want to bathe your forehead," she said. "I will first see that they are not likely to do any further mischief."

She backed her horse a few steps and looked down at Dobson. He was breathing heavily and was quite unconscious. Across his face was a livid mark where she had struck him. King, too, was lying on his back groaning, but he tried to get up when she approached. She drew carelessly away.

"That little creature isn't much hurt," she said, carelessly. "Perhaps I had better not dismount. My groom must be up in a minute or two. His horse went lame, so I rode on."

"There is a revolver on my shelf—if I could only get up," Strone muttered.

He made an effort and fell back, ghastly pale.

"Is it loaded?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Tell me exactly where it is."

"On the second shelf—over the fireplace."

She rode to the door and dismounted. Syd King, who had been shamming, slunk off. She fetched the revolver and a basin.

"We shall not need it," she remarked, "the little man has run away. I am afraid this is going to hurt you, but it must be done."

It hurt so much that he fainted. She tore up a handkerchief and bound his wound skilfully. Then she forced some whisky between his teeth. His colour became more natural, and in a moment or two he opened his eyes. The touch of her cool fingers was delicious.

"You are better," she said, quietly. "I can hear my man coming now."

She drew a silver whistle from her pocket and blew it. The groom, who saw signs of something unusual from the lane, dropped from his lame horse and came running up. She strolled over to where Dobson was still lying, and stood looking at him.

"I think this brute is going to die," she remarked, carelessly. "Wildfire kicked him in the side."

Strone was past speech. The groom arrived breathless.

"John," she said, "you are to wait here till I can send a carriage for Mr. Strone. If that man there tries to get away or moves shoot him. Here is the revolver. If Mr. Strone comes to make him drink some more whisky. Hold my stirrup."

The groom obeyed.

"Yes, my lady."

"There's another of these creatures in the wood," she said, swinging lightly into the saddle. "I don't think he'll come back, but you'd better not leave Mr. Strone."

"Very good, my lady."

She turned and cantered off, a canter which soon became a gallop. In less than twenty minutes she was at the Vicarage. Her brother met her at the door.

"You are late, Beatrice," he exclaimed. "I was getting nervous."

"Oh, you mustn't scold," she answered. "John, I'm a heroine—really. I have saved the miracle crane and Robinson Crusoe's life. I don't understand what it was all about, but I believe Wildfire and I between us have killed one man and lamed another. Please to order the brougham to go and fetch Mr. Strone at once."

Martinghoe stared at her in blank amazement.

"What on earth are you talking about, Beatrice?"

he exclaimed. "I was with Strone an hour ago, and he was all right."

"Well, I was with him twenty minutes ago," she answered, "and he's got concussion of the brain pretty badly, I think. I bound his head up as well as I could. Send the brougham, John, and I'll go and change. You'll hear all about it at dinner time. And, oh, you'd better send the boy on your bicycle to the police station. There's the creature I nearly killed lying there still."

"For Heaven's sake, Beatrice, what does it all mean?" Martinghoe exclaimed, ringing the stable bell violently. "Do be more explicit."

She sighed, and looked back upon the stairs.

"Dear me," she said, "I thought that I had made it so clear. I found three men trying to kill poor Robinson Crusoe, and Wildfire and I rode them down. Robinson Crusoe's badly hurt, so I suppose he must come here—and I really think the man I knocked down will die, but the police station will do for him. Please order dinner in. I shall only be a few minutes, and I am very hungry. Don't forget to let the boy fetch the doctor."

"But, Beatrice—"

"I decline to offer any further explanation until dinner time, but you can order up some champagne for me. I really am quite exhausted."

Martinghoe despatched the carriage. His sister was invisible for half an hour, and the door of her room was locked even upon her maid. When she appeared

for dinner there was an odd flush upon her cheeks, and a strange look about her eyes. She drank a full glass of wine before she touched anything to eat.

"Poor Robinson Crusoe," she murmured. "What a head he will have. Now I will tell you all about it, John."

CHAPTER XV.

Strone had concussion of the brain—a fever followed. A weaker man would certainly have succumbed. His sober life, however, and his fine physique came to his rescue. In a fortnight he was convalescent.

Those were wonderful days. Martinghoe would not hear of his removal, and Lady Malingcourt, in a mild sort of way, actually helped to nurse him. They were days the effect of which remained with him all his life, which went far, indeed, towards the fashioning of his future. He came back to his senses, thrilled into very vivid life by the thought of that wonderful episode. He owed his life to her, to the almost reckless bravery with which she had elected to defend him. The memory of it left him tongue-tied. Day after day passed, and his pent-up gratitude remained unspoken. It found at last some faltering expression which she checked at once.

"I did hope," she said, stifling a yawn, "that you were going to show your common-sense by avoiding that subject. It is so ridiculous to imagine that anyone could have ridden away and left you to be murdered by those madmen. If you want to thank anyone, thank Wildfire. It was his heels that settled the matter. You look ever so much better to-day."

"I am almost myself again," he answered. "Tomorrow I shall be well enough to go away."

She laughed softly.

"I fancy that the doctor will have something to say about that," she remarked. "Besides, it is foolish. We have plenty of room here—or rather John has—and I know that he likes to have you."

"It is very kind of you both," he murmured.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"John leads a lonely life out here," she said. "I hope you will remember that, and come and see him often when I am gone."

He looked up at her quickly. His heart had stopped beating.

"Are you going away?" he asked.

She smiled.

"Don't you think that I have paid rather a long visit as it is?" she asked. "I have two houses of my own I am supposed to look after, and I had no end of engagements for last month and this. As a matter of fact, this is the longest visit I have ever paid here in my life."

He raised himself upon his elbow.

"The longest visit you have ever paid here?" he repeated. "Perhaps that is because you have had more friends staying near?"

She looked into his eyes and laughed softly. Strone felt the hot colour burn his cheeks. Something had happened! She was changed. The tired woman of the world had gone. She was not bored, she was not

listless any longer. She was looking at him very kindly, and her eyes were wonderfully soft.

"Perhaps I have found one more," she said, smiling, "and have been content to be without the others. Let go my hands, sir, at once—and remember you are on no account to sit up."

She drew a little away from him. His brain was in a whirl. He was scarcely sure of his sanity. Then a maid announced some callers, and with a little nod and an admonition to go to sleep she left him. Sleep! What chance of that for him? Her hand had lain for a moment in his—the touch of her slim, soft fingers still thrilled him. No wonder that he felt the life stirring once more in his veins.

He saw no more of her that afternoon. Only from out of the open window he heard occasionally the sound of her voice, once or twice her lazy, musical laugh—more indicative of contempt than merriment—came travelling out to him. Strone waited in an agony of impatience for her visitors to go—and waited in vain. She did not reappear that afternoon, and her visitors, Captain Devenhill and his sister, remained to dinner. Strone, who was to have spent the evening downstairs, sent a message of excuse.

Later on Martinghoe came up and sat with him. They pulled their chairs up to the open window, and Strone smoked his first cigar since his convalescence.

"Mr. Martinghoe," Strone said, "do you know that I owe my life to your sister? Those blackguards meant to kill me."

Martinghoe nodded.

"I am afraid they did, Strone. I must say I am rather proud of Beatrice. She was always plucky, though."

"She won't let me thank her," Strone continued. "I must speak of it to someone. I shall never forget it, Mr. Martinghoe, as long as I live."

Martinghoe nodded kindly. Then he noticed the flush on the other's face.

"It is one of the subjects," he said, "which the doctor says we must leave alone till you are stronger. Dobson is in the hospital, as you know, and I doubt whether he will ever come out—the other two men got away. Listen. Beatrice is going to sing."

Strone talked no more that night. To him it seemed as though life itself were suddenly set to music.

.

Meanwhile that great change in Strone's temporal fortunes, which as yet he had only dreamed of, had actually come to pass. Mr. Dobell was a constant visitor, and every day he brought fresh news. Strone's model had been rescued, and it spoke for itself. Patents had been applied for in every country of the world. Already an offer was forthcoming for the American rights, the amount of which sounded to Strone like a fairy tale.

"It's a hundred thousand pounds," Mr. Dobell said, "and the Syndicate will re-sell for a quarter of a million at least. But it will be cash, and we want the money. What do you say?"

"I leave it to you," Strone said. "Do as you think best."

Mr. Dobell nodded, and drew a parcel from his pocket.

"Of course, I don't know exactly how you are situated, Strone," he said; "but we are both business men, and there need be no false modesty about finance so far as we are concerned. I have opened a private account for you at the Gascester Bank, and I've brought you a cheque-book. Here are the partnership deeds too. You must look them through at your leisure."

"You're very kind," Strone answered.

Mr. Dobell laughed.

"The miracle crane is going to make both our fortunes, Strone," he said. "Look sharp, and get well. We want you at the works."

He drove off in his dog cart, and Strone undid the parcel, looked wonderingly at the cheque-book, and started with surprise at the amount in the bank book. For the first time he realised in some measure his altered position in life. A golden key had come into his hands, many doors in the pleasure house of the world would fly open now at his touch. Pictures, statuary, a library, travel, these things which he had always craved were now within his reach. It had come with a magical suddenness—it was hard even now to realise. Where was he to draw the line? Where were the limits of the things which he might set himself to win? Then the four walls of his room fell away. He stretched out his arms, his eyes kin-

dled, he tore away the bandage from before his eyes. No more hypocrisy! The madness which had become the joy of his life was stealing through all his veins, his heart beat fiercely with the delight of it. He pitted his common-sense against what he had deemed a fantasy, and his common-sense vanished like smoke, and the fantasy became a real living thing. She was as far above him as the stars—a delicately nurtured woman, with all the grace and beauty of her order—he was a mechanic of humble origin, ignorant of the ways of her world, of the world to which she must for ever belong. What matter? He was a man, after all, and she was a woman—and there was the golden key. It was in his hands, and who in the universe had ever been able to set a limit upon its powers! With her own lips he had heard her murmur, half in jest and half in earnest, her adoration of it. His common-sense mocked at him, but the madness was there like a thrall. So when he heard her carriage stop, and the trailing of her skirt as she crossed the lawn, he rose up and went to meet her.

Full of his purpose, on fire with eagerness, and very nervous, he failed to notice a certain change in her manner which at any other time would instantly have depressed him. Her eyes had lost a certain kindly light with which she had lately regarded him, her tolerant good humour had given place to an aloofness which was almost frigidity. Yet he rushed upon his fate.

“Will you sit down for a few minutes?” he asked. “There is something I want to say to you.”

She paused.

"I am a little tired," she said. "Will another time do?"

"No," he answered. "I am going away early tomorrow, and your brother tells me that you have friends coming to dinner."

She followed him without comment to the seat under the cedar tree. She leaned back and half closed her eyes. She was certainly a little pale.

"Well?"

"Mr. Dobell has been here."

"Your employer?"

"Yes. At least he was my employer. He is to be my partner."

She opened her eyes and looked at him now with languid curiosity.

"Is that not rather a sudden rise in the world?" she asked, carelessly.

"It is very sudden," he answered. "It is the miracle crane. Mr. Dobell has had it patented, and we have been offered one hundred thousand pounds for the American rights alone. Mr. Dobell says that there is a great fortune in it."

She looked at him with wide open eyes, eyes full of an expression which baffled him, which, if he had been a wiser man and more versed in woman's ways, should have been a warning to him.

"I congratulate you," she said, quietly. "You are wonderfully fortunate to become rich so suddenly, at your age."

Her tone was altogether emotionless, her lack of en-

thusiasm too obvious to be ignored. He was puzzled. He became nervous.

"You know that it isn't the money I care about," he said. "You yourself have always admitted that to be a power in the world wealth is a necessity. I only care for money for what it may bring me. You once said that the millionaire is all powerful."

"Did I?" she answered. "That of course was an exaggeration."

He rose suddenly to his feet, a flush in his cheeks, his tone husky. He stood over her, his hand upon the back of her seat, his eyes seeking to penetrate the graceful nonchalance of her tone and manner.

"Lady Malingcourt," he said, "for wealth and even for power I have but small ambition. A pittance and a cottage would content me. But there is one thing in the world—perhaps I am mad to dream of it—I know I am, but if ever I had the smallest chance of gaining it there is nothing I would not attempt, nothing I would not do."

There was a sharp break in his voice, a mist before his eyes. Lady Malingcourt was studying the pattern of her lace parasol. Suddenly she closed it and looked up at him.

"Don't you think you had better postpone the rest—until after dinner?" she said, quietly.

"No," he answered. "You and your brother, Lady Malingcourt, have been very kind to me. You have made me sometimes almost forget the difference between a mechanic such as I am, and gentlepeople such

as you. So I have dared to wonder whether that difference must be for ever?"

"You are really rather foolish to talk like this," she remarked, smiling placidly at him. "I do not know quite what difference you mean. There is no difference between your world and mine whatever, except that a mechanic is often a gentleman, and gentle-people are often snobs. You are wonderfully modest to-day, Mr. Strone. I had an idea that people with brains like yours considered yourselves very superior to the mere butterflies of life."

"I am speaking as I feel," he answered. "I have tried to make myself think differently, but it is impossible. One can't ignore facts, Lady Malincourt, and when I am with you I feel rough and coarse and ignorant; I feel that even to think of what I want to say to you is gross presumption."

She rose slowly to her feet.

"Then do not say it, Mr. Strone," she said, quietly, "and leave off thinking about it."

His eyes sought hers eagerly, passionately. There was no sign in her face of the woman from whose hands had fluttered those white roses, through the darkness into his keeping. Her head was uplifted, her eyes cold—even it seemed to him that her delicate lips were slightly curled. His heart sank like lead.

"You see, after all, I am right," he cried, bitterly. "You are angry with me, you will not let me speak. You think I am mad because I have dared to dream of you as the one hope of my life."

"No," she answered, "I am not angry with you. I

hope that you will never allude to this again, so I will tell you something. The difference of rank between us counts for nothing. You are young, and you have gifts which will make you, when you choose, willingly accepted amongst any class of people with whom you care to spend your days. But, nevertheless, I consider what you were about to say to me presumption."

He started quickly. They were face to face now upon the edge of the lawn. Lady Malingcourt had drawn herself up, and a bright spot of colour burned in her cheeks. It was one of those rare occasions when she permitted her feelings to have free vent.

"That you are a mechanic," she said, "makes you, to be candid, more interesting to me. Nothing in your circumstances would have made your feelings towards me anything but an honour. It is as a man that you fail. Your standard of life is one which I could not possibly accept. I presume that it comes from your bringing-up, so I do not wish to say anything more about it. Only I beg you to consider what I have said as final, and to do me the favour of thinking no longer of what must remain forever absolutely—impossible."

She swept past him, and entered the house. He remained for a moment nerveless and tongue tied. The lash of her bitter words stupefied him. What had he done?—wherein had he so greatly failed? After all, what did it matter? About him lay the fragments of that wonderful dream which had made life so sweet to him. Nothing could ever re-establish it. He staggered out of the gate, and walked blindly away.



CHAPTER XVI.

The man's passion found kinship with the storm which broke suddenly over his head. The thunder clouds rolled up from the horizon, and the lightning shone around him with a yellow glare. Below him the tree tops and the young corn were bent by a rushing wind—even the cattle in the fields crept away to shelter. The sky above grew black, forked lightning now glittered from east to west, writing its lurid message to the trembling earth. He sat on a high rock bareheaded, and the rain falling now in sheets drenched him through and through. He had lost all control of himself. The passion which had been his sole inheritance from his drink-sodden parents mastered him easily. At that moment he was almost a savage. He cursed John Martinghoe and the moment when he had been lured into the belief that his self-education and mastery of self had made him the equal of those who were divided from him only by the accident of birth. He cursed the woman whose kindness had led him into a fool's paradise, the sudden change in his position which seemed now only a mockery to him. The fit passed with a little outburst of shame. Nevertheless, it was with bent head and grey-lined face that he crept downwards to his cottage, drenched to the skin.

There were signs of recent habitation about the

place which he did not understand, but which troubled him little. He heaped wood upon the embers of a fire and sat over it, shivering. Almost a stupor came over him as he sat there, weak from his recent illness, numbed to the bone with the clinging dampness of his clothes. If this thing had happened to him in health, he would have met it more bravely. After all it was the end which he had always told himself was inevitable. A sense of bitter shame was mingled with his dejection. He had built up his life so carefully only to see it sent crashing about his ears at a woman's light touch. So he sat brooding amongst the fragments while the rain beat fiercely against his window-pane and the wind howled in the wood.

Stupor and sleep co-mingled. He came to himself suddenly, awakened by the opening of the door, the sweeping of the wind like a whirlwind through the room. He looked around. Milly stood there, her pale cheeks glowing with the sting of the rain and the wind, her hair in picturesque disorder, her eyes alight with the joy of seeing him. She dropped a heap of parcels and fell on her knees by his side.

"Oh, thank God!" she sobbed. "Oh, I am so glad to see you, so glad!"

Her streaming eyes, the warm touch of her hands pierced his insensibility. He even smiled faintly.

"What are you doing here, child," he asked, "on such a night, too? Why, you are wet through."

She evaded his question, horror-stricken at his own state.

"You're fair soaked," she cried, "and you only just out of bed. Mercy me!"

She brought out his grey homespun clothes from the chest, and with deft fingers herself removed his coat and waistcoat, talking all the while.

"They must have been mad to let you come back on such a day," she exclaimed. "Well, I never. The rain's gone through the lining. It's a mercy you've had sense to keep the fire in. I'll make you a hot drink directly."

He submitted himself to her care. After the agony of the last few hours the sound of her shrill but not unpleasant voice and her breathless anxiety on his behalf seemed almost grateful. He was hustled into dry clothes, and his feet and hands were rubbed into a state of glowing warmth. Fresh logs were thrown upon the fire, a kettle boiled and some tea deftly prepared. From one of her parcels came bread and meat. He ate at her bidding. Outside the storm grew in violence.

He slept for awhile, and awoke to find her watching him. She lay crouched almost at his feet, the fire-light playing on her brown hair, her eyes wet with tears. A clearer sense of what was happening came to him. He sat up suddenly.

"How did you come here?" he asked. "How did you know that I was coming back?"

It was the moment for which she had been waiting in painful anxiety. Her voice shook.

"I—didn't know!"

"Then what—I don't understand," he said.

"I haven't a home," she said. "Mother died last Thursday, Nancy's taken the kids, father's in gaol—he's got six months."

His old pity was revived. He smoothed her hair.

"Poor child!"

At his touch the sobs came. Her head drooped upon his knee.

"Nancy wouldn't have me in the house, her husband thinks he likes me, and I am afraid of him. I'd nowhere to sleep, so I walked out here, meaning to sleep in the woods. Then I heard of what had happened, and that you were away, and I stole the key and crept in. Don't turn me out, oh, don't! I'm all alone in the world, and I don't want to be like the others. Let me stay! I'll do everything for you. I won't speak when you don't want me to. You'll never know I'm here, except when you want anything done. Oh, please, please be kind to me. If you don't I shall go and drown myself. I've been miserable so long."

Her cry went to his heart, pierced even the dull lethargy of his own despair. The rain was dashing against the window. He glanced at the clock—it was nearly midnight.

"Poor little waif," he murmured, "and there are so many like you."

She crept sobbing into his arms, her hands were clasped around his neck. For her it was happiness immeasurable, for him, too, there was a certain solace in the thought that this lone creature loved him and

was dependent upon him. She went to sleep, curled up upon his knee, holding him tightly to her. He sat with wide open eyes, gazing into the fire all the night long.

CHAPTER XVII.

John Martinghoe stood at his study window watching the dying away of the storm. All night long the wind had gone roaring over the hills and down the valleys, and the rain had fallen in torrents. Now with the morning the skies were clearing, and the wind had dropped. Behind him Lady Malingcourt was yawning over her letters.

"John," she said, after a while, "I believe that you are one of those depressing creatures whose spirits are affected by the weather. You have scarcely wished me good morning, and you are as gloomy as an owl."

"I was thinking," he said, "of Enoch Strone."

She poured herself out some coffee and opened another letter.

"He has disappointed you, has he not?" she remarked.

"I don't understand his sudden departure," Martinghoe admitted. "He wasn't fit to go back to that cottage, and on such a night, too."

"He is probably being well taken care of there," she answered, quietly.

Martinghoe turned quickly round. She, too, had heard something, then!

"What do you mean?" he asked.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Mr. Strone always represented himself, did he not,

as a man without relations or friends? He has spoken often of his absolutely solitary life."

"Well?"

"It isn't nice to talk about, is it, but I daresay you know as much as I do. I passed his cottage yesterday, and there was a girl there—from Gascester. She seemed quite at home, and she had no account to give of herself."

"You spoke to her, then?"

"Yes, I am sorry to say that I did. Your Mr. Strone had interested me. I must confess I was anxious to find that there was some explanation of her presence."

"And there was none?"

"Absolutely none."

Martinghoe sighed.

"I am very sorry," he said. "I liked Strone. I believed in the man and his self-respect."

"He is a fool," Lady Malingcourt said, in a bitter undertone. "John, I have an invitation from Lurton Towers. I think I shall go."

He laughed.

"The world and its vanities once more. I was afraid the quiet here would pall upon you."

"I have enjoyed it immensely," she declared, "but I really think it has come to an end. All the young men have asked me to marry them, and one can't live in a country where one meets rejected suitors in every lane and at every party. It's too embarrassing."

"I wonder whether you will ever marry again, Beatrice?" he asked, thoughtfully.

She stood up and came over to his side, a beautiful woman, young, graceful, and rich. More than one society paper had asked the same question.

"I believe not, John," she answered. "If I do I warn you that it will be a 'mesalliance.' You know I have a weakness for men."

"You are rough upon our aristocracy, Beatrice!"

She laid her hand upon his shoulder.

"Not necessarily, John. It is only the idlers whom one meets in society, and they do not count for anything. The men are politicians or colonists or soldiers, keen soldiers I mean, not drawing-room dangles. They have better things to think of than marrying and dancing attendance upon women. Who on earth is this coming across the fields like a madman?"

Martinghoe followed her gaze.

"It is Strone," he exclaimed. "What on earth is the matter with the man?"

Lady Malingcourt turned from the window.

"He will be shown into your study, of course," she remarked. "If by any chance he should inquire for me I do not wish to see him."

"I will remember," Martinghoe answered gravely.

With wind-tossed hair, splashed with mud, pale and wild-eyed, Strone stood in the middle of the study when Martinghoe entered. For the moment the two men were speechless—Martinghoe was shocked, Strone defiant, still breathless with exertion. It was the clergyman who first recovered himself.

"Why, Strone," he exclaimed, "what on earth have

you been doing? Sit down, man. You will be ill again if you don't mind."

Strone looked at him dully. He made no movement towards a chair.

"I'm here—on business," he said.

"On what?" Martinghoe repeated, wonderingly.

"On business. I want to get married. You see to that sort of thing, don't you?"

Martinghoe dropped into an easy chair speechless. His first thought was that illness had touched Strone's brain.

"You're joking, Strone," he exclaimed, weakly.

Then Strone laughed long and bitterly, and the echoes of his laugh reached to the little morning-room where Lady Malingcourt sat with her letters spread out before her.

"A man doesn't joke about his own damnation, does he!" Strone exclaimed. "Get out the papers! Tell me what to do!"

"Let me give you a glass of wine, Strone," Martinghoe said, quietly. "You're not quite yourself?"

"Keep your wine," Strone answered, fiercely. "I've told you what I want. Here's the woman's name. I've written it down. Now tell me what I have to do."

"It is very simple, Strone," Martinghoe answered, "but this is a serious matter, and I had no idea that you contemplated anything of the sort. Come, be reasonable. Sit down and have a chat with me about it."

"I'm damned if I sit down in this house again," Strone answered. "It's your duty to see to these things, isn't it? Why do you keep me waiting?"

Martinghoe rose suddenly. Before Strone could protest, he had taken him affectionately by the arm and led him to his own chair.

"Strone, old fellow," he said, "you're in trouble. Just you forget that I'm a parson, and tell me all about it. Now sit down there and out with it. What's the good of having friends if they can't help you at a pinch. God knows I'll help you through it if I can, old man."

And Strone, whose strength was utterly gone, sapped away by his illness, his misery and that terrible walk, broke down for the first and only time in his life. He sank into the chair, and turning sideways buried his face in his hands. His huge frame was shaken with sobs. Coldness and ridicule he was prepared for and armed against—the man's sympathy was irresistible. Martinghoe sat silently by his side, his hand resting gently upon Strone's shoulder.

"Never mind, never mind," he murmured. "Have it out! I've been through it myself—and we're locked in."

It was an altered face which Strone turned upon him presently. Passionate no longer, but piteously pale and lined—as it seemed to Martinghoe—with the traces of an indelible sorrow. Nevertheless he was calm. Martinghoe forced him to drink wine.

"Don't hurry," he said, "sit quiet for a bit and talk afterwards."

Strone nodded gratefully. There was a long silence. Strone became himself again.

"Mr. Martinghoe," he said, "please forgive me! I forgot myself when I came in. I was mad!"

"Not another word," Martinghoe begged. "I could see that you were upset."

"I've got to make a clean breast of everything to you, Mr. Martinghoe," Strone said. "It'll do me good, and I'll like always to feel that you know the truth. It's a confession," he continued, "that's what it is! You're going to think me the biggest fool upon this earth. Never mind! Here goes! Last month I had lived alone for fifteen years! I've had no friends, I've known no women. I've read a lot, and I've got to be fond of beautiful things. You came to see me—I found an unexpected pleasure in talking with you. I came to your house—I met Lady Malingcourt. Don't think me mad, sir. Remember, I had never spoken to a lady in my life. Your sister is very beautiful, and she was very kind to me. I heard her sing. I went clean mad! I know it! But at least I meant to keep it to myself. Then my miracle crane turned out a success. I was to be rich. I lost my head! I found myself alone with your sister. I wanted to simply ask her a few questions and to try and find out from her answers whether at any time in the future there would be the least chance for me. Instead I lost my head. I showed her plainly the folly of which I had been guilty. She treated me—much as I deserve."

Martinghoe was slowly recovering from his amazement. He thought well of Strone, but the man's confessed aspirations had taken him wholly by surprise.

"I am very sorry," he said. "It was a mistake, wasn't it, to say anything to my sister, at present at any rate?"

"It was a mistake," Strone answered bitterly, "which I must regret all my life. I left in haste. The storm came on, I reached my cottage, desperate and miserable. But I've got to tell you about Milly—the girl you saw me with one Sunday morning. She's a Gascester factory girl, mother and father drunkards, living in a beastly court. I found her one evening in the woods, and she told me her story. I was sorry for her, and I let her stay with me all one day. She came again! It gave her pleasure, and I couldn't find the heart to stop her. Then came my accident and illness—and yesterday afternoon when I got back to my cottage the girl was there. She sobbed out a pitiful story. Her mother was dead, her father in prison. She was turned out of her house and came over to see me. My cottage was empty—she took possession of it. She had been there for two days. She prayed me not to turn her out—to let her stay. Martinghoe, you've got to believe me! I never thought what it meant. I wasn't myself. It didn't seem possible to turn her out. So she stayed!"

Martinghoe was speechless. The tragedy of the man's life was there, grim and hopeless. His heart was racked with pity. The horror of it was appalling. He remembered the girl, recalled what he knew of her class, and a passionate desire to save Strone seized him.

"Strone," he said, thickly. "You are going to be

rich, you can see that she is removed from her miserable life. You can make her future secure. Answer me like a man. Is this marriage your duty—or—or—

Strone interrupted him, and his words were like a knell.

"It is my duty," he answered. "There is no escape. You are a clergyman and a Christian, Martinghoe. You would not dare to advise me to shirk it."

Martinghoe stood up. He held out his hand.

"God help you, Strone," he said.

And the pagan answered "Amen!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

The two women stood face to face on the threshold of Strone's cottage, Milly surprised, untidy, annoyed, Lady Malingcourt a study of cool and elegant simplicity.

"Did you want me?" Milly asked—a somewhat unnecessary question, considering that her visitor had knocked at the door.

"You are Mrs. Strone? My brother and your husband were friends. I thought that I should like to come and see you," Lady Malingcourt said, calmly.

Milly stood back from the threshold reluctantly.

"Will you walk in?" she asked. "I didn't know as my husband had any friends—not out this way, at any rate. I've heard of you though. You're the lady that rode those chaps down when they tried to kill Enoch."

Lady Malingcourt smiled deprecatingly.

"It was all very much exaggerated," she said, gently. "My share of it, at any rate. Tell me—how do you like living out here?"

Lady Malingcourt had subsided into a straight oaken chair. Milly leaned against the table. She was miserably conscious of the fact that her arms were red and her hair untidy. She had been cleaning up—the whole place seemed to shine with her exertions. Lady Mal-

ingcourt, on the contrary, who had been dressed by her maid and had driven down, was spotlessly immaculate.

"I don't know as I mind being here so much," she said, "but it's awful lonesome when Enoch's away. I'd like to live near the town, but he won't."

"You must be very proud of him," Lady Malingcourt said. "He is very clever."

"Yes," the girl answered. "He's clever enough."

There was a short silence. Lady Malingcourt was a woman whose social gifts were many, but she scarcely knew how to make headway with this sullen, uncommunicative girl, who was evidently displeased with her visit, and did not take the trouble to hide her feelings. She looked around the room. It was the same, yet different. Everything was spotlessly clean, but somehow the atmosphere was altered. The chairs were ranged in order against the wall. There were enormities in the shape of woollen antimacassars, a flimsy curtain hung before the small window. A table on which Lady Malingcourt had noticed a "Spectator" and "Fortnightly Review" was littered over now with copies of the "Young Ladies' Journal," some cheap and highly-coloured sweets, an untidy work-basket. Lady Malingcourt sighed softly, and then finding those keen, jealous eyes fixed upon her face was for a moment uncomfortable. She rose. Her visit was not likely to be a success. She had come partly on impulse, partly to gratify a strange and unreasonable curiosity. She had learnt what she had de-

sired to know. She realised the tragedy which was overshadowing Enoch Strone's life.

"You must walk over to the Vicarage some day," she said, holding out her hand. "I am not there very much, but my brother will always be glad to see you."

Milly took the offered hand awkwardly, even with some reluctance.

"Visiting ain't much in Enoch's way," she said, "and I don't know as I care much about it myself."

Lady Malingcourt remained for a moment as though she had something more to say, and in that moment the eyes of the two women met. Milly had not been brought up in the school which reckons self-control amongst the virtues, and in her face was clearly written her distrust and jealousy. Lady Malingcourt saw these things and was silent. The words which had trembled upon her lips remained unspoken. She left the cottage with a formal farewell, and walked towards her carriage, passing on the way a pasty faced young man, sucking industriously at an extinct cigarette. She returned his impertinent stare with a glance of frigid contempt. He strolled jauntily on and when he reached the cottage whistled.

"Hi! Milly!"

She came out, recognised him, and nodded a greeting.

"Here again," she remarked. "You seem wonderful fond of this part of the country all of a sudden!"

"It's the scenery," answered her, with a solemn wink. "Where is the boss?"

"Inside," she answered laconically.

The young man looked for a moment uncomfortable. Then he caught sight of a gleam of mischief in her eyes, and grinned.

"What a one you are for kidding," he remarked. "Come for a stroll in the wood. We can see him coming."

She shook her head.

"You get along, Charlie," she said. "You ain't no call to come round 'ere. How's Ada?"

"Bother Ada," he answered vigorously. "Who wants her?"

She laughed shortly.

"You did—once," she declared. "You'd better take and marry her. Make first-rate wives, those barmaids."

He waived the subject.

"Come down in the wood," he suggested again. "I want to talk with you."

"Not me," she answered. "If you want to talk, talk here. He comes home any time now."

The youth was annoyed. He rolled another cigarette with yellow stained fingers, and stood with his hands in his pockets, looking disparagingly around him.

"Why don't you make him live in the town?" he asked. "He could afford a real good house with a servant. He's making piles of money."

"Better ask him yourself," she answered, bitterly.

"Like it out 'ere?" he asked.

"I hate it," she answered, brusquely. "I ain't got a soul to speak to from morning to night. When he comes home it's books, books, books. He's that wrapped up in 'em that he hasn't a word for anybody."

"You'd better have had me, Milly," he said, with a leer. "I've got a trap of my own now—yellow wheels—regular slap up."

She faced him indignantly.

"You're a nice chap to come 'ere and talk," she answered. "When you could have had me for the asking you didn't want. Oh, your sort makes me sick—always on the whine—only wanting what yer can't have. Why don't yer go and take Ada for a drive in yer trap with yellow wheels instead of fooling round here? I don't want yer, I'm sure."

"Oh, get on," he answered, gloomily. "I've chucked Ada. I only took her out once or twice. You was the girl I was kinder set on."

"Pity you didn't mention it," she answered, with a sniff.

He knocked off a thistle head viciously with his stick. Every now and then he looked stealthily towards the lane beyond the grey stone wall.

"You were in such a blooming hurry," he grumbled. "Anyway I'm fond of you—always was, and I don't like to see you put on."

"Who's put on," she interrupted, truculently.

"You," he answered. "Strone's making piles of the ready, rolling in money. I don't know what he does with it, but he's no right to keep you 'ere."

"How do you know he's making piles of money?" she demanded.

"Why, don't everyone know it?" he declared, contemptuously. "He's a partner in Dobell's, ain't he? Perhaps you didn't know that."

"No," she answered, "I didn't."

"He ain't doing yer right, Milly," her champion declared, confidently. "You don't need to be so blooming standoffish."

He edged a little nearer to her. She kept her face averted, but did not move away. He reflected that he had kissed her more than once, and an unreasoning desire possessed him to repeat the enterprise.

"Come down in the wood," he said. "The sun's so 'ot here."

"Not now," she answered. "He'll be home directly. You'd better go. He won't care about seeing you round."

"He'll have to lump it, then," the young man declared, valorously. "He's got his friends, ain't he?"

She nodded.

"Maybe."

"And I'm your friend, ain't I?"

She regarded him curiously.

"I suppose so."

"Then why shouldn't I come and see you? It's awful lonely 'ere, Milly. Will you come out for a drive one afternoon?"

She hesitated. The idea fascinated her. The days were terribly long, and she was not made for soli-

tude. All the time he watched her with fishy, anxious eyes.

"I'll see," she answered.

He rose up.

"Monday afternoon," he said. "I'll bring the trap."

"I don't promise," she answered, slowly.

"Oh, you'll come," he declared, confidently. "We'll have a high old time. I'll be here about three. Milly, give us a kiss, old girl. I'm off with Ada fair."

She withdrew precipitately from his threatened embrace.

"I like that," she exclaimed, "and out 'ere for 'im or anyone to see. No thanks!"

"Well, let me come inside for a moment then."

She shook her head.

"It's past his time," she said. "You'd best be off."

He rose with suspicious alacrity.

"Well, it'll keep," he declared, jocosely. "On Monday then, eh?"

"I'll see," she answered.

CHAPTER XIX.

Once more Strone pushed his bicycle up the long, flint-strewn hill, paused at the bend to wipe the moisture from his streaming forehead and sought for a moment the shade of the overhanging trees. He drew a long sigh of relief, the old joy of these quiet places beat once more in his heart. A late summer had come at last to fruition. The bracken was knee deep in the woods, the primroses and hyacinths were gone, but the hedges were wreathed with wild roses, and the perfume of honeysuckle was heavy on the slowly moving air. In Strone himself the change was wonderful. His step was listless, the fire had gone from his eyes, deep lines furrowed his forehead. He held himself no longer erect, but as a man who carries a heavy burden. Life had narrowed in upon him, he looked forward with a shudder, the past was as a sealed book. Only some days there came little flashes of memory. He found himself suddenly recalling those wonderfully sweet days of his freedom, when every shadow of care seemed to pass away as he rode out from Gascester, when the wind and the sun, and the song of the birds had been his companions. That was all over now. He climbed the steep hill with listless footsteps, no longer full of anticipation of those long hours of exquisite solitude which had become so dear to him. Those days

had gone by—for ever. Milly would be waiting at the door, would shower upon him caresses which long ago had palled, would chatter emptily and dwell peevishly on the long day's solitude. He found himself thinking with a shiver of the interminable evening. There was no escape. If he went out she would follow him, if he read she sulked. He groaned to himself as he turned the last corner and caught a glimpse of the grey smoke curling upwards.

Then he stopped short in the middle of the lane. What little colour the heat had brought into his cheeks died away. He looked wildly around, as though half inclined to leap the grey stone wall and vanish in the tangled wilderness beyond. Yet there was nothing more alarming in the way than a smartly turned out victoria descending the hill towards him, and leaning back amongst the cushions a tired looking woman in a white dress and hat with pink roses. Almost at the same moment she saw him, and leaning forward she stopped the carriage. To his amazement she stepped lightly out, gave the man an order and waited for him in the shade of a great oak tree which overhung the road.

He ground his teeth together and advanced to meet her steadily. She greeted him with her old quiet smile. She too, he thought, was looking pale and listless.

"I'm so glad to see you. Do you mind resting your bicycle somewhere, and coming into the shade? I will not keep you very long."

He obeyed her in silence. Words seemed difficult to him just then. They stood in the shadow of the

trees which hung over from the wood. The foxgloves and bracken brushed against her skirt. She lowered her parasol, and seemed for a moment intent upon studying the pattern of the filmy lace. The man's heart beat out like a sledgehammer. Yet he stood there, slowly mastering his emotion, and it was the woman who found speech so difficult.

"Mr. Strone," she said, at last, "you would not consider me an impulsive person, would you?"

"By no means," he answered.

"Yet I am here," she continued, "upon an impulse. Yesterday I was at Cowes. In the morning I had a letter from my brother—he wrote chiefly about you. I hate travelling, especially in the summer, but to-day you see I am here, and I have come for no other purpose than to see you."

"It is inexplicable," he said, slowly.

"Never mind! It has happened. I am here, and I am going to indulge in the luxury of plain speech. You do not mind?"

"I have heard plain speaking from you before," he answered, looking her in the face.

She faltered visibly. It was so hard to say—even from her to him. She forgot all the advantages of her birth and social training, the graceful tact which in all the ordinary affairs of life served her so well had suddenly become a dormant and an inutile thing. They stood face to face, man and woman, and she was tongue-tied. Above their heads the twittering of birds, up the road, the occasional jingling of harness as her impatient horses pawed the ground, fretted by the heat

and stung by a small army of flies. For once her readiness of speech had deserted her. Their eyes met, and he saw a woman who was strange to him, a woman the languid calm of whose features had fallen away as a mask, whose delicate ivory cheeks burned with colour, whose clear cold eyes were suddenly revealing new and wonderful depths of feeling. All the bitterness fled from him.

"Forgive me," he said, softly. "I will listen to whatever you have to say."

She smiled faintly. Something seemed to have fallen away from between them. Speech was no longer difficult.

"I will live up to my new reputation," she said. "I will remain a woman of impulse. I will tell you something which a few minutes ago I was very sure that I would never tell you."

She paused. He remained speechless, his eyes fastened upon her.

"Go on."

"One afternoon when you were at the Vicarage I had a fancy to look at your cottage. I came—and found it occupied. I questioned the girl. She was a friend of yours, she said, her things were about the place, she was confused, what she said seemed incapable of bearing more than one interpretation. I accepted the inference—and that afternoon there was plain speaking—on the lawn."

He was no longer steady on his feet, and in his ears was the rushing of strange sounds, trees and sky were mixed up together.

"You believed—that?" he gasped.

"I judged you," she answered, "by the standard of a world which I believe to be lower than yours. Remember, too, that in many ways I knew so little of you. Different classes of society regard the same thing from such different points of view. Yes, I judged you. I want your forgiveness."

He looked at her wildly.

"What infernal sophistry," he cried. "What is sin in your world is sin in mine. All that lies upon my conscience is your doing—and I have paid the penalty with eternal bondage."

"Mind," she continued, drearily; "I do not say that even without this I could have answered you differently."

He silenced her with a passionate gesture.

"No matter," he cried; "you would not have sent me away with a knife in my heart, a raving lunatic, fit for any devil's trap! It is bad enough that it should have happened, it is worse that you should have told me. What, in God's name, have you come here for?"

She smothered a sob.

"Don't you know why I came," she said. "John wrote that things were going ill with you. You looked thin and miserable, he said. You would not see him, he had met you wandering about like a man in torment. I am a selfish, idle woman, Enoch. I have no future, and I go drifting down the broad stream of what we call pleasure, because there is nothing else for me to do. But with you it is so different. You have a great future—you are a man, and you have power. I want

you to rouse yourself—I want to hear you make a stir in the world. This is what I have come to say to you—to preach a very simple doctrine. Make the best of things.”

He dropped her hands, he pointed over the road.

“What about her?” he cried, hoarsely.

“It is the hardest part of all I know,” she continued; “but she loves you, and, Enoch, a man can make of the woman who loves him what he pleases. You must do your duty. She is yours, she must share your life.”

“Then my life must be an accursed thing,” he moaned.

She shook her head.

“Be a man, Enoch Strone,” she said, firmly. “Do your duty to her and she will repay you. Remember that even such a marriage as yours is no light thing. For good or for evil the yoke is upon your shoulders. A woman who is scorned and neglected by her husband is in an evil way. Once you were brave and faced your duty. All that you will undo if you drive her from you. Take her into your life—and for the rest—I want to hear you make a stir in the world. There is room for you in great places, Enoch Strone. This generation is empty of strong men. Fill your life with ambitions, and remember all those wonderful dreams of yours. Strive to realise them. Tell Milly about them; let her know each day how you are getting on. Come out of the crowd, Enoch, and let me feel that I have known one man in my life at least

who was strong enough to climb to the hilltop with another's burden upon his shoulders."

He listened to her with kindling eyes, conscious that the old passion for life was moving once more in his veins—conscious too with a certain sense of wonder at the transformation that this woman who was pleading with him so earnestly stood revealed in a wholly new light. The delicate vein of mockery which sometimes gave to her most serious sayings an air of insincerity, as though conversation were a mere juggling with words, seemed to have passed away. She spoke without languor or weariness, and her words touched his heart—stirred his brain.

"I have been a coward, Lady Malingcourt," he said, gravely. "You have made me realise it. I shall be grateful to you all my life."

She smiled a little sadly.

"Perhaps," she said, "I too shall have a better conscience when I hear the world talk of Enoch Strone. For I know, I fear I know, whose hands have fastened that burden upon your shoulders."

The man in him leaped up, vigorous and eager. He faced her with glowing eyes.

"If the burden had been twice as heavy," he cried, "I would bear it cheerfully now. For ever—"

He stopped short. Some instinct told him that any further words were unnecessary. As she had spoken and looked, so would she remain to him for ever. So he called her carriage, and once more her fingers rested in his great work-hardened hand.

"Good-bye," she said simply. "Good fortune!"

He took his bicycle and trudged through the white powdery dust up the steep hill, upwards to the hill-top, his head thrown back, new dreams forming in his brain. And downwards the woman was carried, leaning back amongst the cushions of her victoria, her dim and unseeing eyes fixed upon vacancy, a faint wistful smile upon her lips. For her there were no dreams, a sense of weariness sat heavy in her heart. Her brief spell of living had passed away. The old languor crept like an evil narcotic through her veins.

CHAPTER XX.

"No, I ain't going, I tell you! What's the use o' bothering? Go and make it up with Ada. I don't want nothing to do with you."

The young man was both hurt and annoyed. He was wearing a long and very light driving coat, kid gloves, and a bowler hat of rakish appearance. When he had contemplated himself in the glass a few minutes before starting he had recognised at once how hopeless was Milly's case. Strone was carelessly dressed, rough in his manner, something of a crank. No wonder Milly was weary of him. Her marriage he looked upon as entirely due to pique. On the whole it did not displease him. Milly, he felt convinced, was his for the asking. He would be able to play the gallant without fear of consequences. So when Milly flatly refused to take that expedition with him on Monday afternoon he was naturally more than a little annoyed.

"You're off your blooming nut about Ada," he exclaimed, testily. "You haven't no call to be. I tell you I've chucked her. Don't want no more to do with her. There was only one as I ever cared about—you know that, Milly."

The speech, which once would have made her heart beat, passed by unnoticed. She simply yawned over her work and tilted her chair back against the side

of the cottage. To further irritate her visitor Milly was certainly looking her best that afternoon. She was wearing a new blue serge dress which Strone himself had chosen. Her luxuriant hair was carefully arranged, and a bright ribbon pinned around her throat was chosen to harmonise with her complexion. Lothario puffed at his black cigar savagely and thrust his hands into the side pockets of his driving coat in sporting fashion.

"Look here, Milly," he said, persuasively, "just walk down and have a look at the trap, anyhow. That won't do you no harm, will it? You might bring your hat along in case you change your mind, eh?"

"Shan't," she answered, tersely. "I don't want you, Charlie, nor your trap. You'd best be off. He may be home soon, and then you'll catch it."

He laughed derisively.

"Who's afraid! Besides, he don't leave work until six, and it's only three now. Lot's of time for a tool round."

"You can stay, of course," she continued, sewing vigorously, "if you've a fancy for being where you're not wanted. I'll take my work inside."

She rose up, but he stood in the way.

"Give us a kiss, Milly!"

"I'll give you a slap on the cheek, you impudent young beggar," she answered. "Just you listen to reason. I've had enough of you. It ain't no use your coming fooling round. Enoch's a good sort, and I'm going to stick to him. He's a sight better nor you and me put together."

An angry flush suffused his yellow, unwholesome cheek.

"Well, what's upset you all at once?" he exclaimed. "Last time I came you didn't make much fuss about a kiss, and I ain't going to be made a fool of by you, that's straight. No, you don't. Now then!"

She tried to pass him. He caught her by the waist—for a moment they struggled fiercely. The young man's face became an evil thing to look upon. He put out all his strength, and Milly was overmastered. But of a sudden there came to him a most wonderful and unpleasant experience. He felt himself lifted from his feet as though by a grasp of iron—a moment later he was screaming in a gorse bush half a dozen yards away. Strone stood over him with a queer smile upon his lips.

"What's this, Milly?"

She trembled from head to foot.

"He wanted me to go for a drive with him, and I wouldn't. Nasty little beast."

He struggled slowly to his feet.

"All right," he said. "You've encouraged me to come here, ain't you? You ain't made much fuss about a kiss before. I don't want no more to do with you. I'm off."

But to go it was necessary to pass Strone, and Strone stood big in the path with the same queer smile upon his lips.

"If you speak another word to my wife or about my wife," he said, quietly, "I shall thrash you."

"All right," the young man muttered, sullenly. "I don't want to give her away."

Milly turned very pale. Strone laid his hand lightly upon his collar.

"Come this way," he ordered. "Milly, stay where you are."

"What yer going to do?" Lothario whined. "Let me go! D'yer hear? Milly's always been a pal o' mine. I could tell yer——"

Strone shook him till his teeth rattled.

"If you don't keep your ugly mouth shut," he said, "I shall certainly kill you."

"What yer going to do, then? Let me be. I'll go right off."

"I'm going to give you a ducking," Strone answered.

Lothario resisted violently. Strone took him up as though he were a baby, and threw him into the middle of the pond. The toads hopped, and the newts darted away for their lives. Strone waited to see that the shock had not stunned him, and then returned to Milly.

"Milly," he said, gravely, "your friend is down there, and he has a little trap. Do you want to go with him? If so, remember it must be for good."

"No, no," she sobbed. "Little beast! I hate him!"

"How often has he been here?"

"Three times."

"You have let him kiss you?"

"Y-yes; only once."

"You have nothing more to tell me?"

"There is nothing more, Enoch. You won't send me away?"

"No," he answered, "of course not. We are husband and wife, Milly. I didn't listen much to the service when we were married, and I daresay you didn't. Let us make a bargain with one another. Promise me that you will never encourage any more men to come and see you in my absence, and that you will not permit any liberties. I don't want to be hard on you, child. I know your bringing up was none of the best. We will make a fresh start. You shall promise me this, and in return I will make you the same promise. That's square enough, eh?"

Her earnestness spiritualised him. The pale face lifted to his moved him strangely.

"I promise, Enoch. You are too good to me."

"Then that is over," he said. "Now make me some tea, and I will tell you some news."

She brought it out to him, waited upon him breathlessly. The terrible gloom which had oppressed her so much had passed away. He was dressed in new and well-fitting clothes. Even to her untrained eye there was a wonderful change in his bearing and demeanor.

"Milly," he said, "would you like to live in London?"

The thought was like paradise. She strove to contain herself.

"With you, Enoch—anywhere."

"With me, certainly," he answered. "We shall go there next week. You will be able to have a decent house and servants. Dobell's are opening a London

branch, and I shall have to manage it. I ought to have told you some of these things before. I had no right to keep them to myself. You will never be poor again, Milly. It seems as though we were going to be very rich."

"Enoch! Enoch!"

He smiled at the excitement which baffled speech.

"To-morrow I have ordered a carriage to come out. We will go into Gascester, and you must buy some clothes. You had better go and see your sister, and I will arrange something for the children."

She burst into tears.

"I don't deserve it," she sobbed. "Enoch, I'll try to be a good wife to you."

Afterwards he walked out by himself, crossed the field, and entered the deep, cool shade of the wood. It was significant that he passed the spot where he had first met Milly with a little shudder, and hurried away as though even the memory of that night pursued him. All the while a subtle sense of excitement was in his veins, mingled with a strange, haunting sadness. For him the life in quiet places was over. This was his farewell pilgrimage. Henceforth his place was in the stress of life, in the great passion riven heart of the world. His days of contemplation were over. There had come Milly, and he very well knew that the old life here, where the singing of every wind, the music of the birds, thrilled him with earlier memories, was impossible. After all, good might come of it. The sweetness of solitude, of crowd-

ing the brain with delicate fancies, of basking in the joy of beautiful places, was in many senses a paralyzing sweetness. Man was made for creation, not contemplation. So he turned his eyes upon the new world, and there were big things there to wrestle with. The cry of his fellows was in his ears, the cry of those to whom life was a desert place, the long-drawn out murmur of the great nether world. Life would be good there where the giants fought. Perhaps some day he might even win forgetfulness.

Late that night, as John Martinghoe sat smoking a last pipe in his study, there came a soft tapping at the long French window. He opened it cautiously and peered out. A man stood there, grim and with stern, white face.

"Strone!"

"Ay!"

"Come in, man."

But Strone shook his head.

"Not now. Listen. I want you to write—your sister to-morrow. You will do this?"

"Of course, but come in. Have a pipe with me and a drop of whisky. Don't stand there like a ghost."

Strone made no movement, took no notice of the invitation.

"Listen," he continued. "Say that I am doing her bidding; tell her that I shall do it to the end. That is all."

"Come in and write her yourself, Strone. We're friends, surely."

Strone's hand came out through the darkness.

"Good-night, Mr. Martinghoe, and good-bye. Tomorrow I'm leaving a life I have loved very dearly, for a new one which is strange to me. I'm in no mood for talk."

He turned away. Martinghoe watched him vanish, and dropped the curtain.

"Poor Strone!"

BOOK II.

CHAPTER I.

"My dear Lady Malingcourt! Really, if I wasn't sure that you were one of the best natured women in the world I wouldn't dare to ask you. But you see how it is! The man is here, or will be here, and he must take some one in to dinner. George says we must be particular not to offend him. That class of person is so sensitive."

"From which I gather," Lady Malingcourt remarked, with a yawn, "that I am to be taken in to dinner by some one particularly disagreeable. Well, I don't mind! Only please do not call me good-natured. It is so irritatingly untrue. Besides, it makes an inconvenient reputation for me. People expect so much. Who is he?"

Lady Constance Sydenham finished fastening her bracelet, and stood prepared at last to receive her brother's guests.

"My poor woman, it is dreadful, but positively you are our only hope. The Duchess and the very big wigs are out of the question, of course. They go in with the cabinet. That only leaves Polly Arlington

and you. Well, I know Polly. She'd snub him all the time, and laugh outright if he tries to eat his soup with a fork. You needn't smile, my dear. The last one we had did, sooner than ask for a spoon, which somehow they hadn't given him."

"What is it that is going to take me in?" Lady Malingcourt asked. "Something Oriental? I draw the line at colour only."

"The colour will be all right if he washes, which I hear they don't," Lady Constance answered. "It's a Labour member."

"I don't mind that at all," Lady Malingcourt answered. "I am quite used to the species. We had plenty of them in Australia, and they were most interesting."

"I daresay," her hostess answered, absently. "Over here, though, I'm afraid the type is different. The last one we had made speeches in Hyde Park, and had conscientious objections to evening clothes, or rather his constituents had. I've heard something odd about this one but I can't remember what it is, or his name. Groves, bring me the guest list at once. Duchess, how nice of you to be so punctual. I want to talk to you about the bazaar. We've got the hall, and Mrs. Botter-Black has promised to kiss everybody—for a consideration. Dick, talk to Lady Malingcourt, please. She's been entertaining for her cousin, the Governor-General at Melbourne, and she's only just home. She wants to know everything about everybody. George, come here at once, sir. If you can't get down punctually to receive your guests, you shall dine 'em at the

House or at the club. You know that half of them are strangers to me."

Lady Malingcourt smiled at the young man to whose care she had been committed.

"One thing at least," she remarked, "has remained unaltered during my absence—and that is Connie's tongue."

Dick Alward, Lord Sydenham's secretary, dropped his eyeglass and smiled.

"In the House," he said, "she would be invaluable. In private life she is a source of wonder to all of us. Statistics are supposed to be my forte, and I once tried to calculate how many million words a day she spoke. I gave it up. The task was Brobdingnagian. How did you like Australia?"

"I stayed there two years," she answered. "The newspapers gushed when I left, and the women gave me a picture."

"I read it all in the newspapers," he answered. "We were told that you had left a gap which could never be filled, and of broken hearts which could never be mended twelve baskets full. That sounds biblical, but it was in the 'Melbourne Punch.' By-the-by, I was to tell you everything about everybody. Where shall I begin?"

"Do not begin at all," she begged. "I left England to get away from everybody and everything. Let me find out their disasters and their triumphs by degrees."

Lord Sydenham strolled over to them.

"I hear that my sister has been giving you a scare,"

he remarked. "She has been telling you about my labour member."

Lady Malingcourt nodded.

"I am meditating flight," she said.

He looked down at her with twinkling eyes.

"You need not," he assured her. "My labour member is a 'rara avis,' indeed. He is the head of his party, he commands fifty votes, and he is the one man in the House of whom it is safe to predict with absolute confidence that he has a future. More wonderful still, he is a gentleman."

"You take my breath away," she declared; "but you have restored my appetite. Do tell me his name."

Lord Sydenham turned round, and touched a bystander upon the shoulder.

"Strone," he said, "I want to introduce you to my cousin. Beatrice, allow me to present Mr. Strone—Lady Malingcourt."

Under the fire of dinner-table talk they relapsed easily enough into more familiar relations.

"I am not at all sure that I like you," she said, looking at him critically. "Your dress coat came evidently from Saville Row, and your tie is perfection. You are not in character at all. I expected a homespun suit, hob-nailed boots, and a flannel shirt. I wasn't sure about the collar, but I counted upon a red tie. Please don't tell me that you are a club man, and that you go to afternoon teas."

He laughed. Even his voice was subdued.

"No fear of that," he declared. "I am asked here,

and I came purely as a matter of business, and my dress suit was made for this or a similar occasion. When I go out it is generally to meat teas in the suburbs, or midday dinners with my constituents in Gascester. In the street or at the House I dress according to my station. I have even a red tie of which I am very fond."

She stole another glance at him. There were streaks of grey in his black hair, deep lines in his hard, clean-shaven face. If a dinner such as this was a rare event to him, he showed no signs of awkwardness. He joined now and then in the conversation around. Most of the men seemed known to him.

"I have read of you," she said, abruptly, "of your maiden speech and rapid progress in the House."

He lowered his voice.

"It was what you wished."

"Nothing has ever given me more pleasure," she said, simply. "You got my cable?"

He nodded.

"Two words only—'well done.' I have it in my pocket to-night."

She abandoned the subject precipitately.

"And your social schemes?"

"They progress," he answered, thoughtfully. "I have had disappointments, but on the whole—yes, I am satisfied. When you are at Gascester I should like to show you some of my experiments."

She talked for a few minutes to her neighbour on the other side. Then she turned to him and smiled.

"This is the second time we have met at dinner," she said.

"I do not need to be reminded of it," he answered, quietly.

"Your brother asked me to stay to supper,—I think that he had forgotten that you were there. I was in my working clothes, and I am afraid that the flannel shirt was a fact."

She smiled.

"Yes, and you laid down the law upon Ruskin, criticised 'Sesame and Lilies,' and talked of Walter Pater as though you had known him all your life. You were a revelation and a puzzle to me. I was so weary of life just then. I believe you were the first living person who had interested me for many months."

His eyes were looking into vacancy. His words were spoken in the slightest of whispers. Yet she heard.

"And afterwards you sang to us. It was wonderful."

Then the talk buzzed round them, but they were silent. The woman who had represented her Queen in a great country and the man who had been climbing with steady feet the ladder of fame were both thinking of that little country vicarage amongst the hills. She saw him, the first of his type she had ever met, reserved, forceful, at times strangely eloquent, in soiled clothes and brusque manner, yet speaking of the great things of life as one who understood—who meant to conquer. And he remembered her, the

first woman of her order with whom he had ever spoken, the first beautiful woman whose hand he had ever touched. He remembered her soft voice, her lazy musical laugh, her toilette and her jewels, which, though simple enough, were a revelation to him. She represented to him from that moment a new world of delight. All those forgotten love verses whose form alone he had been able to appreciate, welled up in his heart, sang in his book, filled for him with glorious colour the whole literature of love and passion. Her coming had given him understanding. He looked back upon those days as he had done many a time during the last few years—but to-night there was a difference. Like a flash he realised what her coming back meant to him. The old madness was burning in his blood. He had thought himself cured! What folly! The battle was before him yet.

He was roused from his abstraction by a word from her, and found himself apologising to his left hand neighbour for a twice asked question. The conversation became political. A moment later he was gravely discussing the prospects of the Better Housing of the Poor Bill. Amidst a rustling of laces and swish of silk, which sounded to him like the winged flight of many tropical birds, the women passed out. Strone noticed that Lady Malingcourt avoided his eager gaze as she followed her hostess from the room.

CHAPTER II.

Strone was treated with much deference, for he was without doubt in the political world a person of some importance. The balance of parties being fairly even, the Government was dependent upon the support of the Labour men to neutralise the Irish faction. And of late Strone had been pushing his claims with calm but significant persistence. The Government were pledged to his "Better Housing of the Poor" Bill, and he had firmly refused to have it shelved any longer.

"You are ready for Thursday night, Strone?" Lord Sydenham asked.

"I have been ready for four months," Strone answered, smiling. "I am so ready now that I am afraid Thursday is the limit of my patience."

"There will be no delay this time," Lord Sydenham assured him, genially.

Strone moved up a seat.

"I should like to have your opinion," he said, "as to the consideration which the Bill will receive in the Upper House."

Lord Sydenham shrugged his shoulders.

"Our majority is quite large enough," he said. "Of course there will be more opposition than in the Commons. You are prepared for that. I am not even sure about the Bishops."

"I have seen the Archbishop by appointment," Strone said, "and I have discussed it with him thoroughly. He has promised me the Episcopal support."

Lord Sydenham arched his eyebrows.

"You don't let the grass grow beneath your feet, my friend," he remarked.

"We are pledged to the measure," Strone answered, "and it is my duty to make a certainty of it. There was another point, Lord Sydenham, I wished to mention to you. You have referred to my bill as a Government measure."

Lord Sydenham assented, dubiously.

"I want to be assured," Strone continued, "that it will go to the Lords not as a Labour Bill which has secured the support of the Government in the Lower House, but as a Government Bill, pure and simple. You understand me, I am sure. There may be individual dissentients in the Upper House in the former case, in the latter it becomes a party measure."

Lord Sydenham looked grave.

"You ask a good deal, Strone," he said.

"I do not think so," Strone answered. "From the first my terms were that the bill should become law. It is in your interest as well as mine that the Lords should not throw it out. You have it within your power to ensure this."

"I will see Wiltshire," Lord Sydenham promised. "I cannot do more at present. Your bill is going to hit the landlords very hard, you know, Strone."

"There are a good many landlords," Strone an-

swered, "whom I would rather see hanged than merely hit hard."

The Duke of Massingham moved down, wineglass in hand.

"Come, come, Strone. What's this I hear—you want to hang the landlords?"

"Not all, your Grace," Strone answered, with a gleam in his eye. "Only those who house men and women like rats, who let their property tumble to ruin whilst they drag the last shilling of their rents from starving men and women. To such as these I would make the criminal laws apply. They are responsible for many human lives—for the lower physique of our race."

The Duke nodded.

"Very true, Mr. Strone," he said; "very true."

Strone hesitated, and continued, more slowly.

"I cannot hold those altogether guiltless, either, your Grace," he continued, "who, in exalted positions themselves, hand over the management of their property to agents, whose interest it is to delay repairs and exact rents. Upon the list of buildings which I have personally visited, and which I propose to mention in the House on Thursday next, are Merton Courts, Soho, which, I regretted to discover this afternoon, are the property of your Grace."

The Duke started, and almost dropped the cigar which he was smoking.

"I fancy that you must be mistaken, Mr. Strone," he said stiffly. "My agent, Mr. Jameson, is a most respectable man, and he knows his business."

"Yes, he knows his business," Strone admitted, bitterly, "which is to receive all he can and pay as little as possible. Your Grace will probably be surprised to hear that, out of eighty inhabitants of Merton Court, thirty are now suffering or have suffered from diphtheria, the majority have bad throats, and the stench even upon the staircase is so bad that one is afraid to breathe."

"I will visit the place to-morrow," the Duke declared. "If it is as bad as you say it shall be demolished and rebuilt."

"I should further recommend your Grace," Strone continued, "to change your agent. There are other properties under his control which I should class as unfit for human habitation. I will give you a list if you like."

"I will make a personal visit to them all," the Duke replied, "and Jameson shall certainly go if I find myself in the painful position of having to agree with you. I presume, Mr. Strone, that having called my attention to the matter you will now erase my name from the list you spoke of."

"I am afraid I cannot see my way clear to do so," Strone answered, quietly. "There is scarcely an owner there who would not do all that was necessary to save exposure if the chance were given him. I have breathed that atmosphere myself, and I can feel but little sympathy with those who are responsible for it."

The Duke rose and bowed stiffly.

"It may be as you say, of course, Mr. Strone," he declared. "I have no desire to influence you unduly."

They drifted into the drawing room, which at Sydenham House was on the second floor. Strone looked eagerly around for Lady Malingcourt. He found her at last outside on the balcony. He dropped into a seat by her side.

"What a frown," she murmured. "Have you been lecturing people or been lectured?"

He sighed.

"The inside of everything in the world," he said, "is thronged with illusions."

"As for instance?"

"Politics."

She settled herself down comfortably in her chair.

"I know all about your Bill," she said. "Tell me what has gone wrong."

He told her briefly.

"The whole thing is a gigantic juggle," he wound up. "Nothing seems to be done because it is the right and honest thing to be done. It is all managed by an exchange of interest. Do this for me and I will do this for you. That is what it amounts to. I know that Lord Sydenham hates my bill, but he is going to support it in the Commons because he wants my 50 votes to keep him in office. I have an idea that there is a plot to throw it out in the Lords, or at least to send it back to me for modification. So we go on playing round the fringe of things. Nothing ever seems to get done."

"Still impetuous, my friend," she said, smiling.

"Impetuous! I have given pledges to my constituents. I may have to meet them in the autumn, and

there are some things which cannot be explained from a platform."

"Your Parliamentary career is beyond the vagaries of one constituency now," she answered. "You have made your mark."

"By speeches only," he answered, discontentedly. "I want something to show for my labours."

They were silent. Below them was the Green Park, and the pleasant rustling of leaves amongst the lime trees came to their ears, a musical murmur, indeed against the deeper roar of distant traffic, footsteps and human voices. Hansoms with their twin lights burning softly like live things flashed by in a never ceasing procession, a soft breeze blew in their faces. Lady Malingcourt was looking steadily into vacancy.

"It is odd that we should meet like this," she said, softly.

He understood her, and smiled.

"Last time," he said, "we were in the heart of the country, the very quietest of quiet places. To-night I suppose we are very near the heart of the world."

"It is a study in contrasts," she remarked. "Bangdon was an ideal spot for dreams, but it is here that one must work out their destiny. For men London must be a paradise."

"For a man with ambition," he said, "there is no other place."

"You have never regretted the change in your life?" she asked.

"It was my salvation!" he answered.

"Tell me, how you have managed to accomplish so

much in so short a time," she demanded. "Three years ago you were unknown. To-day I hear you spoken of everywhere as the acknowledged leader of the Labour Party. You have quite a Parliamentary reputation too!"

He smiled.

"I have been exceptionally fortunate," he declared. "You see, the Miracle Crane has made our fortunes many times over, and when I decided to go in for Parliamentary work my partner took over the main control of the business. A constituency turned up at the right moment, and I got in at the by-election by a dozen votes. The Labour Party, as you know, was in a poor way. There were half a dozen men who wanted to lead it, and they were all too jealous of one another to stand on one side. I had the advantage of money, and I was an outsider. Hence my position."

"I should imagine it is no bed of roses."

His face darkened.

"Our chief enemies," he said, "are within our own ranks. We are cursed with adherents who are continually making foolish speeches and bringing us all into disrepute. Then you can have no idea of the small jealousies and narrowness which cramp us on every hand. One would never imagine that we should be the one party in the House whose aims are the loftiest—whose cause is the greatest. No, you are quite right, Lady Malincourt. It is no easy matter to lead the Labour Party in the House of Commons."

"Yet," she said, "there is a great work to be done."

"And we shall try our best to do it," he declared.

"United we are a formidable body as things are just now—but it is just the keeping them together that is so difficult."

"I shall come to hear you speak on Thursday," she said.

"I shall do my best! It is a great chance for us!"

They were silent for a moment—someone in the room was singing. Afterwards she glanced swiftly up to him.

"What have you done with the cottage?"

"I have left it—exactly as it was," he answered, in a softened tone. "Nothing is altered. Sometimes I go there. It rests me."

She looked away.

"And your wife?"

"She is well."

"Is she—in London?"

"Yes."

"Have you—any children?"

"None—thank God!"

She kept her head averted. The last two words had told her much that she was anxious to know.

"And you live?"

"In Kensington!"

"Tell me about your wife."

"You have remembered?"

His voice hardened.

"I have tried to do my duty," he said. "It has not been easy, but I have done my best."

With a relief that was absolutely mutual she abandoned the subject.

"Do you know that all my friends are very complimentary to me since my return home," she said. "Everyone has told me how much older I look."

His eyes met hers steadily.

"I can see no change," he said. "To me that afternoon might have been yesterday!"

"Australia is very trying," she said.

"You must tell me about it."

They talked till the emptying room brought them back to the present. She rose up, very beautiful in the dim moonlight, slim and stately as ever. Unchanged but for a certain increased womanliness which it seemed to her that this man alone had power to evoke. Those of her friends who had spoken of a certain weariness—almost a hardness—which had come upon her during the last few years would have seen no trace of it at that moment.

"Almost," he said, "this reminds me of the night when it rained white roses—which Captain Devenhill never found."

She flashed a very sweet sidelong glance at him—an unspoken question trembled upon her lips.

"I have them still," he said, simply. "I shall always have them."

Lord Sydenham touched him on the shoulder.

"One word, Strone," he said. "I will not keep you a moment."

Lady Malingcourt bade them good-night gravely, and vanished. The two men stood together upon the balcony.

"The Duke has been talking to me, Strone," he

said. "He is anxious that his property should not be alluded to on Thursday night."

"It is," Strone answered, "not to be wondered at."

Lord Sydenham hesitated.

"Strone," he said, "you are a youngster from a Parliamentary point of view, and I'm sure you don't think a word of advice out of place from an old hand. Never make enemies—especially such enemies as the Duke of Massingham. His influence is very great, it may become a factor worth your consideration at any moment. I am commissioned to make you this offer. Omit his name, and the whole of his properties shall be rebuilt, and, mark this, your Bill shall go through the Upper House untouched.

Strone hesitated.

"I don't like it," he said. "It's a bribe after all."

"If you want to accomplish anything in this world," Lord Sydenham said, slowly, "either for the sake of your own personal advancement or for the sake of a cause which you have at heart, you must broaden your views. Don't be pig-headed. It's fatal. You mayn't like giving in, but mark my words, if you don't the Duke will wreck your Bill."

"In which case, of course, our compact is at an end," Strone remarked.

"I can only do my best," Lord Sydenham answered.

"I will think it over," Strone decided.

CHAPTER III.

Strone pushed his way through the little crowd of servants who were waiting about the entrance to Sydenham House, and turned westwards on foot. This meeting, always looked forward to, always counted upon as a certain part of his future, had taken place at last. She was unchanged, as beautiful as ever, and her old power over him was not one whit lessened. More vividly than ever he realised how his present position was almost wholly owing to the stimulus of her appeal to him. Step by step he had fought his way doggedly onwards. Difficulties had been brushed away, obstacles surmounted. He had kept his word, he had justified her belief in him. He had taken his place if not in her world, at least amongst those who had the right to enter it. Henceforth they might meet often. Surely the summer of his life had come.

And as he walked through the quieter streets more daring thoughts even came to him. He dreamed of a friendship which should become the backbone of his life, which should bring him into constant association with her, which should give him the right to offer at her feet the honours he might win—she, the woman who had first inspired him. He saw nothing of the passers-by; the respectful good-night of the policeman and the faint importunities of the waifs who floated out from the shadows and vanished again like moths

were unheard. The old music was singing in his blood; he walked as one whose footsteps fell upon the air. And then—crash down to earth again. He was in front of his house in Kensington, unlit and gloomy. He made his way quietly in with the aid of a latchkey, and stood for a moment in the hall hesitating.

From a room on the ground floor came the glimmer of a light. He made his way there softly, and opened the door. A woman was stretched upon an easy chair asleep. He stood over her with darkening face.

Milly had not improved. Her prettiness had vanished before a coarsening of features; she was stouter and untidy even to slatternliness. Her cheeks just now were flushed, and she was breathing heavily. On the table by her side was a tumbler. He took it up, smelt it and set it down with a little gesture of disgust.

She showed no signs of waking. After a moment's hesitation he ensconced himself in a neighbouring easy chair, and, taking a roll of papers from his pocket, began to read, pencil in hand. For some time he worked; then the manuscript slipped from his hand. He sunk a little down in his chair. With wide open eyes he sat watching the extinct grey ashes on the hearth. The clock ticked and the woman's breathing grew louder. There was no other sound in the house. He was alone with his fate.

Something woke her at last. She sat up and looked at him.

"Hullo!" she exclaimed. "How long have you been there?"

"An hour—perhaps more," he answered. "You were asleep."

"No wonder," she grumbled. "Enough to make one sleepy to sit here hour after hour alone. You've got home from your fine party, then."

He rose up.

"It is late," he said. "I will turn out the light."

"Wait a bit," she answered irritably. "I want something to drink."

"I wouldn't have anything more if I were you," he said, "Come to bed now."

"Oh, indeed! You've had all you want, I know. Pass that whisky bottle."

He poured out a little and filled up the glass with water. She raised it to her lips with a contemptuous little exclamation.

"Whisky ain't good enough for you, I suppose," she remarked. "Been drinking champagne, eh?"

"I really don't remember," he answered. "If you prefer champagne there's plenty in the house. I'd rather you drank anything than spirits."

It struck him that there were several empty glasses about, and the room smelt of tobacco smoke.

"Have you had visitors?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Yes. Mr. Fagan and his wife."

He frowned.

"I don't see why Fagan should come when he knew I was out," he remarked.

She laughed hardly.

"You'd grudge me even their company, would you?"

Well, they came in to sit with me, and Fagan let a hint or two drop. You'd better look out, my man."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"They ain't none too well pleased with you, these labour chaps aren't, and I don't wonder at it. What do you want going to lords' dinner parties dressed up like one of them. Fagan says that ain't what you were sent to Parliament for."

"Fagan is an ignorant ass," Strone exclaimed, passionately. "I am doing my best for the cause, and my way is the right way. My presence at Lord Sydenham's to-night was no personal matter. It was a recognition of our Party, and a valuable recognition. I am surprised that you should listen to such rubbish, Milly."

"Fagan may be right and he may be wrong," she answered, "but he reckons that you're getting too big for your boots. It don't want fine gentlemen to speak for working men."

"We won't discuss it, Milly," Strone said, quietly. "I will put out the light."

"Hold on a bit," she exclaimed. "Look here! Why shouldn't I have a say sometimes as to what we should discuss and what we shouldn't? Were there any women at your fine party to-night?"

"Yes," Strone answered, "there were women there."

"Then why wasn't I asked?" she demanded, setting down her empty glass. "That's what I should like to know. Just answer me that."

"It is so hard to make you understand, Milly," he said. "I was not there as a private guest at all.

Socially everyone was of a different rank. I was there as a man who could command votes. You would not have been comfortable, and I am sure that you would not have enjoyed it."

"You mean I ain't good enough," she declared, fiercely. "That's what you're thinking. What's the difference between us, I should like to know. You were a mechanic and I was a factory girl. I can behave as well as plenty as calls themselves ladies."

"I have no doubt of it, Milly," he answered. "It happens, however, to have nothing whatever to do with the question. Please to come to bed now."

She plumped down upon a chair and folded her arms.

"I won't," she said. "Me and you have got to have this out. We're husband and wife, ain't we? I won't be left alone, night after night. What with your Parliament and your meetings and your parties, I don't get a show nohow. You ain't taken me to a theatre for a month. When you're at home at all you've been shut in the study writing, writing, writing, as though your life depended upon it."

"It is my work," he answered, coolly. "I have to do it. It is part of my life. You can live at Gascester if you like."

"And have you gallivanting up here with your fine friends," she exclaimed, scornfully. "Not me. Why don't some of 'em come and see me? I shan't bite 'em. If you're good enough I am."

"I can't ask people to come and see me whom I only know politically," he answered. "Be reasonable,

Milly. The Sessions will be over before long, and then I will take you to the seaside."

She was a little mollified.

"Will you take me to a music-hall on Thursday?" she asked. "The Masons are coming up from Gascester."

He smiled.

"Not on Thursday. It happens that I am to make a speech in the House that night of some importance. I thought perhaps you would like to come and hear it."

"Not I," she answered, bluntly. "I've been there once, and it gave me the blues. A lot of old fossils that want putting in a museum, I call 'em. Make your speech on Friday night instead, Enoch. I've promised the Masons we'd take 'em out."

"It is quite impossible," he answered, with a faint smile. "The date has been fixed for a long time. If you had the least sense of what was reasonable you would not ask such a thing."

Her eyes flashed angrily.

"Come, that's the style. Call me unreasonable now. Bother you and your speech. I'll take the Masons out myself, and I'll write and make sure that Dick comes. Oh, we'll have a good time, never fear."

He hesitated.

"Milly," he said, "don't go out with those people. The young men are cads, and I don't like the girl. Leave it till next week, and I'll take you anywhere you please."

She laughed scornfully.

"I don't want your friends," she said; "don't you interfere with mine. Give me some more whisky."

He caught her arm, and holding her as in a vice with one hand, with the other poured the contents of the bottle into a bowl of flowers.

"You've had all the whisky you're going to have to-night, Milly," he said. "Now—go to bed."

She was suddenly pale. Before he could tell what she was about to do she leaned over and struck him a stinging blow on the cheek with the palm of her hand.

"Beast!"

He did not move. He was numbed with a curious sense of horror. She turned away and left him with a shrill little laugh, which sounded oddly in his ears for long afterwards.

CHAPTER IV.

Strone had never ranked as an orator even amongst his own party. He was looked upon as a keen and skilful debater, a man of sturdy common-sense, marvellously clear-headed and thoroughly earnest. On the night of his great speech, however, he made a new reputation.

His opening phrases scarcely gave promise of anything of the sort. He was unaccountably nervous, over-anxious to do justice to the cause which was so dear to him, and at the same time horribly aware that he was not succeeding. Suddenly, however, after a somewhat prolonged pause a wave of memory swept in upon him. He remembered what he himself had passed through, the underworld of the great cities was laid before him. It stretched away before him, a ghostly panorama, its wailing rang in his ears, the death cries of its children shook his heart. Then, indeed, he straightened to his task. His speech was stilted no longer, his deep voice shook with passion. These rows of unemotional men, some sorting papers, some whispering, some giving him a laboured attention—they too must see and hear. And they did! It was as though a great canvas were stretched before them, and Strone, with the lightning brush of a great master, was painting with lurid touches a terrible picture, a picture growing every moment

in horror, yet from the sight of which there was no escape. "It is like this," he cried, and the wan, starved faces of dead children gleamed pale upon the canvas; "like this," and loathsome vice and unspeakable disease stalked before them, and shook bony fists, which seemed indeed to move on the canvas and threaten the spell-bound audience. "See!" And countless forms seemed to throng the canvas, an endless and awful perspective of suffering and death-smitten humanity. "Men and women like you and yours, born with an equal right to taste the sweetness of life, ground into the likeness of parasites and criminals by your accursed social laws. Murder is a terrible crime, but it is not only their bodies which you destroy, but their souls. God help those on whose shoulders the burden of these things must rest."

There were statistics, a plain statement of the practical measures necessary and a brief but passionate peroration. A thrill went through the House when Strone spoke of himself, only newly come from that world for whose salvation he pleaded. All the sins of the universe, all that was ugly, and vicious, and detestable sprung from that pestilential under-current down which were ever drifting the great stream of lost humanity. Drink was an effect, not a cause. A miserable existence begat despair, despair drink, and drink crime. Let them awake from their indifference, their cynicism, or false philosophies, and strike a mighty blow at the great heart of the hideous monster. Life and freedom were gifts common to all. Those who sought to make them a monopoly for the rich

must pass through life to the shadow of death with an appalling burden upon their shoulders. And more than any in the world, those men to whom he then spoke must face this responsibility.

So he pleaded, no longer at a loss for words, passionate, forceful, touched for those few minutes at any rate with a spark of that Divine fire which carries words straight to the hearts of men, the gift of true eloquence. When at last, and with a certain abruptness, he resumed his seat, there reigned for several moments a respectful and a marvellous silence. Then a storm of cheering broke the tension, cheering from all parts of the House, led by the Prime Minister, joined in by the leader of the Opposition. Strone gained much for his cause that night—his own reputation he made for ever. He had become a power amongst strong men. He was henceforth a factor to be reckoned with. During the debate which followed, pitifully tame it seemed, men craned their heads to look at him, reporters eagerly collected such crumbs of information as they could gather concerning his history, his past and his future. And Strone himself sat with impassive features but beating heart, for up in the wire-covered gallery he had seen a pale, beautiful face, whose eyes were fixed upon his, who seemed to be sending a message to him through the great sea of space. Presently, indeed as he passed from the body of the House, a note was thrust into his hand, hastily written in pencil.

“Well done, my friend. Some people are having supper with me at the Milan Restaurant. Will you

come on there as soon as you can? Do give me the pleasure of telling you what I think of your speech."

Strone crumpled the note up in his hand, hesitated for a moment, and turned towards the exit. But he was not to escape so easily. His way was besieged and his hand shaken by many whose faces were strange to him. The Leader of the House spoke a few courteous words, Lord Sydenham patted him on the back. He passed out into the cool night air, with burning cheeks and eyes bright with the joy of life. Yet, even then the man was true to himself, steadfast to his great aims. It was the triumph of his cause which delighted him, his personal laurels were to him a matter of secondary importance. He had made people feel, if only for a moment, the things which he felt. He had pierced, if only for a short time and for a little way, beneath the surface that marvellous cast-iron indifference with which nineteen-twentieths of the world regard the agony of the submerged twentieth. Good must come of it. Not only was his bill safe, but the way was paved for other and more drastic measures. The work of his life stretched out before him. It seemed to him then a fair prospect.

He passed through the streets with a wonderful sense of light-heartedness. His own troubles were for the moment small things. He had found the panacea for all sorrow. At the Milan he handed his coat and hat to a liveried servant, and was ushered to a table brilliant with flowers and lights at the head of the room. Lady Malingcourt rose to receive him, and held out both her hands.

"Welcome, master of men," she exclaimed, with a gaiety which seemed intended to hide the deep feeling which shone in her eyes, and even shook a little her voice. "You have given us a new sensation. We are deeply and humbly grateful."

The Duke of Massingham patted him good naturedly upon the shoulder.

"I can congratulate you with a whole heart," he said, "for you have spared me. Your cause will not be the loser, Mr. Strone. If it costs me a year's income, I will mend my ways."

A chair was brought for him between Lady Malingcourt and Lady Mary Sychester, the Duke's daughter. They filled his glass, and the conversation interrupted by his entrance was resumed.

"I saw you in the House," he said to Lady Malingcourt.

"I would not have missed it," she said, simply, "for anything in the world."

He bent over towards her.

"I should like you to remember," he said, softly, "that my own presence there—all this—is due to you. I should like you always to remember that."

She shook her head.

"No," she said, "I cannot believe that. Your lethargy would have passed away in time."

"I do not think," he said, "that it would ever have passed away. Whatever may come of it, or of me, should be dedicated to you."

"Mr. Strone," said a soft voice at his elbow, "I must tell you that you made me feel very uncomfort-

able once this evening. You spoke with such bitter derision of the fashionable craze for slumming—you likened it, I think, to the craving of the gallery for the blood and thunder of the melodrama. I think you were a little severe.”

“I was, without doubt, too severe,” he admitted. “One is led into extremes.”

She sighed.

“I am sure I tried to study the problem of how to do a little good amongst the people I visited,” she said. “It seemed insoluble. Everyone must admit that conditions exist which should not. It is very hard to try and set them right.”

“Degeneration,” he said, “has been a slow process, and regeneration must also be a weary task. You and I, Lady Sychester, may work every minute of our days, yet we can scarcely hope to see the result of our labours. Generations must go to the remodelling of any corrupt social state. Nevertheless, we should not cease to do all that we can. There is scarcely any honest attempt which has not some effect, even if it is imperceptible.”

“I wish,” she said, “that you would come and see us some day, and help me with your advice.”

“I will do so with pleasure,” he answered.

“I shall write and remind you,” she assured him.

Lady Malincourt bent over to him.

“You should start a crusade, Mr. Strone,” she said. “Half the women in the world are heartsick for the want of something to do.”

He laughed.

"You speak with authority," he said. "Yet I wonder how many women in this room would give the diamonds they are wearing to drag up a single one of their fellows into the light."

She looked thoughtfully around. The room was full—a brilliant study in light and colouring. The shaded electric lamps shed a rosy glare on the little parties of bejewelled and bedecked women—the soft hum of laughter and pleasant voices mingled with the music of the violins. The air was heavy with the voluptuous odour of flowers and cigarettes and many strange perfumes. It was the hour of relaxation. Strone, who, too, had been studying it, smiled softly to himself. Of all the gorgeously dressed women in the room, Lady Malingcourt in plain black net with a single pearl hanging by a pendant from her neck was the most striking and the most beautiful.

"This place," she murmured, "is an education. If only they could contrive to keep out people like those. The women are awful. Hear them laugh."

He glanced carelessly over his shoulder. Then his heart stood still and a sickening sense of shame possessed him. The little party to whom she had pointed were most certainly conspicuous in many ways. It was Milly and her friends from Gascester.

CHAPTER V.

Strone's first horrified conviction was a true one. Milly and her friends had had quite enough to drink. Their voices rose with shrill persistence above the pleasant murmur of conversation which floated about the room. The young man was volubly finding fault with the bill. The director of the rooms came up frowning.

"What is the matter here, Jean?" he asked quickly, in French.

The waiter shrugged his shoulders contemptuously.

"Monsieur is not satisfied with his bill," he said.

"It is quite correct. They are pigs. They have had too much to drink."

The director took the place of his subordinate. He regarded the young man with disfavour. He wore a made-up tie, and a red silk handkerchief protruded from his waistcoat. His cheeks were puffy and his eyes unwholesome.

"The bill is quite correct, sir," he said. "I must beg you to pay it at once and leave."

"And—what?" the young man demanded.

"And leave! There have been complaints about the noise. At once, if you please."

The young man lost his nerve. He thrust his hand weakly into his pocket. His sister, however, a florid

young woman with a huge fringe, and an imitation diamond in her hair, stopped him.

"Such impertinence," she exclaimed. "Pay the man his money, Dick, but we shall please ourselves when we go. We've paid for what we've had, ain't we?"

"For what we haven't had, I should think," the young man answered, plucking up some spirit. "Look 'ere, you, Mr. Headwaiter. What do you mean by charging half a crown for one cup of coffee?"

"It was Turkish coffee, and specially prepared," the man answered, impatiently. "The bill is correct. Be so good as to pay it, and leave."

"I'll pay the bill, though it's a blooming robbery," the young man answered, "but I shall leave when I'm ready."

The director looked towards the door.

"Monsieur should consider the ladies," he said quietly. "If he does not leave at once we shall be compelled to have you all removed."

The young man turned round with a hollow show of dignity.

"Do you know whom you are talking to, sir?" he asked. "Here's my card!"

The director did not even glance towards it. He was getting angry.

"I do not want to know who you are, sir," he answered. "I only desire that you leave this room at once with your party. We are not accustomed to having people here who do not know how to behave themselves."

"You can do as you jolly well please," the young man declared, loudly. "I shall go when I choose, and the ladies, too. I can tell you this, though. It will be the last time I or my friends come near this place."

"Monsieur will not have the opportunity," the director said drily, beckoning to the door, "and his friends we can very well dispense with."

The table had become the focus of attention. Lady Malingcourt set down her lorgnettes with a little shiver. She had recognised Milly. She glanced at Strone, and her face was full of pity. He avoided her eyes, rose, and murmured his apologies. Then he crossed the room and approached the little group.

"Milly," he said quietly.

She looked up and recognised him with distinct relief.

"Hullo!" she exclaimed. "You here!"

He took up her gloves and fan from the table.

"Come with me."

She obeyed without a murmur. The director stood back respectfully. Strone passed him a bank note.

"Take the amount of the bill from that," he ordered.

"Come, Milly."

The young man welcomed Strone vociferously.

"How are you, Strone? I say, talk to this Johnny for us, there's a good chap."

Strone took not the slightest notice. He motioned to Milly and she passed before him down the room. They were the cynosure of all eyes. Strone, though he never turned an eyelid, suffered acutely.

"Have you anything in the cloak room?" he asked. She shook her head.

"No!"

The commissioner called a hansom. Strone handed her in and took the seat by her side. They drove off. Milly burst into tears.

"It's a beastly horrid place," she sobbed. "I never knew such rude people in my life."

Strone made no reply. He was sitting with folded arms looking fixedly at the lights which flashed across the dark river. She mopped at her eyes, and glanced sideways at him.

"You might have stood up for us a bit, Enoch."

"Unfortunately," he answered, "my sympathies were on the other side."

"We hadn't been doing anything," she exclaimed, indignantly.

"You were all three—behaving shockingly," he said. "I saw you roll up and throw a serviette at Mason. Your voices were audible all over the room. The Milan is not a public-house."

"What were you doing there, I should like to know?" she asked, suddenly aggrieved. "Didn't I ask you to take me out this evening, and didn't you say you had to make a speech or something? You're a nice sort of a husband."

"I made my speech," he answered, "and then received an invitation to supper. I can assure you," he continued, bitterly, "that if I had known what was before me I should not have accepted it."

"Felt ashamed of your wife, didn't you?" she asked, passionately.

"I had cause to."

"A fig for what you felt," she cried. "I don't care for you or your stuck-up friends. You can keep 'em. Let me get out. I won't sit here with you. I'll walk! Do you hear?"

He held her firmly in her place.

"Sit still! Listen to me!"

"I won't!"

"You shall. I asked you to go to the House of Commons to-night to hear my speech. You declined. If you had come this would not have happened. Let us understand one another. I will give you all the time I have to spare from my work, and you must be satisfied with that. I will not have you going about with people like the Masons."

"I have to put up with such friends as I can get," she said, sullenly. "I ain't good enough for yours."

"I will have no friends, Milly," he answered, gravely, "who think that. I will do the best I can to make life endurable for you, only you must do as I ask about these people."

She suddenly turned upon him, pressed her face to his, leaned her head upon his shoulder. He was horrified by the quick impulse of revulsion which seized him. Her hair had been done by a small hairdresser, and smelt of cheap scent. A hideous aigrette brushed against his cheek. Her cloak fell open, and her dress, far too décolleté, and of a hideous blue silk, revolted him.

"Enoch," she sobbed. "Why ain't you a little fond of me? I'm so miserable."

"I am fond of you, Milly," he answered, lying boldly. "Sit up, dear. We are in the street."

"I don't care. Kiss me, Enoch."

He obeyed. The touch of his lips was like ice. She drew back suddenly and looked at him. Then she shivered a little and pulled her cloak around her.

"I wish I were dead."

"Rubbish!" he declared. "You shouldn't have such fits, Milly. You must try and be a little more reasonable."

"Enoch," she asked, suddenly. "Is there another woman?"

"If you ask such mad questions, Milly," he said, sternly, "I shall not talk with you at all."

"It is either that," she said, in a low tone, "or else it is your stupid work—or else—you never cared for me a little bit. I liked you better at Bangdon. I wish we were back there."

He sighed.

"You mustn't talk like that, Milly," he said. "Remember that it is a man's duty in life to make the best he can of his career, and the woman's duty is to help him."

She laughed oddly.

"Fancy me—helping you!"

"You can! You can help me by keeping away from those people whom you know I dislike, by reading a little every day, by taking some interest in my work."

The cab pulled up. They entered the house together. It was late, and the servants had gone to bed. Strone turned on the electric light. She stood watching him—a dishevelled and unpicturesque looking woman in her ugly dress and untidy headgear.

"I ain't the right sort of wife for you, Enoch," she said, wistfully. "I ain't, am I?"

"Don't be silly," he said with an attempt at lightness. "There's no reason why we shouldn't get on all right. We'll make a fresh start and see what we can do."

He turned the handle of his study door. She stood on the bottom stair and watched him. Her eyes were full of tears. That fateful room again!

"Enoch!"

"Well?"

He turned round a little impatiently.

"It's late! Ain't you—coming now?"

He avoided her eyes.

"Not yet. I have some letters to write. Make haste and get to sleep. It will do you good."

She dragged herself upstairs with weary footsteps. Strone passed into his study and locked the door.

CHAPTER VI.

The next morning's post brought Strone a pile of letters. He glanced them through hurriedly enough—invitations, congratulatory epistles, appeals for charity. But towards the end he came across one in a familiar handwriting. He leaned back in his chair and opened it. It was dated from the National Liberal Club.

Dear sir,—We are much disappointed not to have seen you here to-night. It was, I thought, understood that an informal meeting should take place to report progress and discuss the prospects of the Bill. We took the liberty of sending round to your house, but found you had not returned. There are several matters which we should like to put before you, and as I believe to-morrow is Director's Day at your office in Leadenhall Street we will wait upon you there at eleven o'clock.—I am, yours truly,

Richard Fagan.

Strone read his letter through and flung it on one side with a little exclamation of contempt. Not a word of congratulation. By his speech he had ensured the passage through the House of a Bill which Fagan and his friends had been working at for years. They took no account of his success! They went out of

their way to complain at his absence from a meeting of which he had received not the slightest intimation. He felt that this note was the beginning of the end, the first definite sign of revolt in a party who were already contemplating throwing him over. He glanced at his watch, and sent for a hansom. As he passed into the hall Milly descended the stairs.

She was wearing an untidy dressing-gown, and her hair was coiled in dishevelled fashion on the top of her head. Her eyes were red, and her general appearance far from attractive. Strone looked her up and down with a disapproval which he took no pains to conceal.

"You are rather late this morning!" he remarked, coldly.

"What if I am," she answered. "It don't matter to no one, does it?"

"You please yourself, of course—but I think that you might get down to breakfast."

"What for?" she asked, sharply. "Who wants me? You don't! I was down yesterday, and you never spoke a word. You went off without even saying good-bye!"

"I am sorry for that!" he said. "You see, yesterday was an anxious day for me!"

She laughed hardly.

"They might all be anxious days," she declared, "for all the notice you take whether I am in the room or not. As for not getting up to breakfast, well, I like to lie as long as I can. It makes the day shorter."

"Good-bye," he said.

"Good-bye, and good riddance," she answered, with an ill-natured little laugh.

He set down his hat.

"What is the matter with you, Milly?" he asked.

"Matter with me? Oh, nothing," she answered, sullenly. "It's fair sickening, though. Off you go again first thing in the morning, and I shan't see you again till to-morrow morning, and then it'll be the same thing over again. How do you suppose I'm to amuse myself cooped up here? You and your Parliament work, indeed! I wish that it were all at the bottom of the sea!"

Strone thought for a moment.

"I am sorry that I have not more time to spare, Milly," he said. "If you are feeling lonely I must try and get away more. Would you like to come and have lunch with me to-day?"

Milly tossed her head, but she was evidently mollified.

"Have I ever refused—when I've been asked?" she demanded, tartly. "Where and what time?"

"Say half-past one at the Trocadero," he decided. "I'll try my best to be punctual."

She opened the door for him and held up her lips. Strone hated himself for the aversion with which he kissed her. He said something cheerful, and drew a deep breath of relief as he passed through the gate.

He took a hansom to the offices of Messrs. Strone and Dobell, Ltd., and for an hour or more was immersed in business. Punctually at eleven o'clock his head-clerk brought him word that the deputation had

arrived. They were ushered into his private room, and from his first glance into their faces he knew that they had come in no friendly spirit. He smiled grimly as he shook hands with them and prepared for the contest.

Mr. Fagan was accompanied by three supporters whose faces Strone scarcely knew, and who seemed quite content to remain so far as possible in the background. They were to some extent surprised and impressed by their surroundings. For Strone and Dobell, Ltd., were no longer country engineers. They held a patent of world-wide value, and their business had increased by leaps and bounds. Strone's private room was plainly but handsomely furnished. From the adjoining offices came the click of typewriters, the subdued voices of many clerks. The whole place had a busy and prosperous appearance.

"I received your letter, Mr. Fagan," Strone said, leaning back in his chair. "I was not aware that you expected to see me last night. I had a private engagement. However, I shall be glad to hear what you have to say now."

Richard Fagan, a weaver by trade, and M.P. for Oldham, stroked his long beard thoughtfully.

"You must not think, Mr. Strone," he said, "that we have come here to urge any formal complaint against you. You made a rare speech last night. There's no denying that. There isn't a paper on either side that hasn't something to say about it."

"I am very much obliged to you," Strone answered, impressively. "At the same time, I believe I am right

in concluding that your visit here is not altogether a congratulatory one. You have come here not to applaud but to condemn. Very well! Let me know what I have done or left undone. Let me understand the exact position, at least."

Mr. Fagan coughed deprecatingly.

"You must remember, Mr. Strone," he said, "that you're the boss of an independent lot, and we like things explained."

Strone nodded.

"Go on! I'm here. Question number one!"

"There was the matter of the Duke of Massingham's property," Mr. Fagan said, slowly. "That was a flagrant case. We had him on the hip. Why didn't you bring it forward and expose him? You had all the facts?"

"I exercised my own discretion in the matter," Strone answered, coolly. "I did not see that any useful end would be gained in doing so."

"He is an aristocrat, one of the very class whom we have to fight against. It was a fair weapon."

"I am not sure," Strone said, "that I am with you there. I do not look upon the aristocrats as the natural enemies of the poor. I believe the Duke of Massingham to be a well-meaning man. I know that he has dismissed his agent, is pulling down his property and rebuilding it on thoroughly sound lines."

One of the three broke silence. John Inman, a long, lean man, with shock hair, a collar which was certainly not clean that morning, and no tie.

"Mr. Strone," he said, "the papers say that you

were having dinner at Lord Sydenham's on Monday."

"Quite right," Strone assented. "I was. What of it?"

"The Duke of Massingham was there?"

"He was."

"Did you have any conversation with him about this property?"

"I mentioned it."

The deputation, for although self appointed that is what they were, exchanged glances.

"He probably tried to induce you to leave his name out of your speech?"

"He did! I made him no promise. I did what I thought best."

There was an awkward silence. Strone smiled upon them scornfully.

"You are meaning, I suppose," he said, "to impute that I was—what shall we say?—squared by his Grace. Is that it, Fagan, eh?"

"It ain't that," Fagan answered, "but we don't quite see what you want messing about with those swells for. There! Now it's out. You're our man, ain't you? You were a workman a few years ago, and we chose you to lead our little party. Well, you ain't a workman now—they say you are getting on towards being a millionaire, and we read your name in the paper as hobnobbing with these swells all the time—and to tell you the long and short of it, we're beginning to wonder whether you're the right sort of man for our job."

Strone swung round in his chair.

"My income last year," he said, "was twenty-two thousand pounds. Of that sixteen thousand pounds went back to my workmen and to build houses for them. I am not ashamed of that as a practical exposition of my principles. I was present at Lord Sydenham's dinner from a political point of view only. I represented labour there; socially to these people I do not exist, and don't want to. You hint that I made a bargain with the Duke of Massingham. I made none. Yet of his own free will he has guaranteed the passage of our bill through the House of Lords. You have come here with fancied grievances against me. What do they amount to? Simply that having pushed the claims of our little party people are beginning to recognise them. You know very well that we stand better than ever we did. We are in a position to make terms. I am already drafting a bill to improve the position of labour in large manufacturing corporations. There are several other measures you know of which stand well. I am doing my best. If you are not satisfied, let Fagan come and take my place."

Fagan hastened to dissent from any such idea.

"You take our little remonstrance too seriously, Strone," he declared. "All that we want to impress upon you is that you must keep your independence. You are a labour man. You haven't anything to do with the Government or the Opposition. Keep away from them both. You'd make a very fair progressive Conservative. We've got the idea that Lord Sydenham thinks the same."

Strone smiled impatiently.

"My colours," he said, "are nailed to the mast. I am not likely to desert them. I come from the people, and the whole desire of my life is to open the eyes of all educated men and women to the hideous defects in our social laws. My ways may not be your ways. Very well, when the time comes tell me so, and let another take my place."

The deputation withdrew half apologetically. Strone proceeded with his business for an hour or more. Then the luncheon hour came—the clerks trooped out, the outer office was quiet. Strone leaned back in his chair and thought.

He knew the men and their natures—small, jealous, suspicious. He recognised their point of view, and despised it. He knew in his heart that if these were the prophets whom the great cities had sent to be his coadjutors that the time must come before long when he must choose another party or form one of his own. They were honest men, most of them, but ignorant and prejudiced. They would never prevail against men of trained reasoning power, men of acumen and intelligence. A rough sort of eloquence to which most of them owed their election went for nothing in the House. Strone knew that certain lofty dreams of his, as yet but dimly conceived, but gaining for themselves power and reality every day, could never be realised with the aid of such as these. The crusade must be amongst the thinking men and women of the world. Hyde Park oratory and all akin to it was a useless power. Personal influence, the reviews, the conversion, one by one of those who led the world

in thought, these must be the means whereby his cause would be won. These men only cumbered the way, brought disrepute upon a glorious cause. Yet for the moment they were necessary. Before long they would be calling him apostate. In years to come they would deem him their enemy.

He changed his coat, sent for a hansom, and drove westwards. In the vestibule of the Trocadero Milly was waiting for him. They were to have lunch together and do some shopping. Milly had spent several hours over her toilette, and was eminently satisfied with the result. She looked eagerly for his approval when they met. He did his best to satisfy her, but it was at no time easy for him to dissemble. It seemed to him that all the primary colours and all their satellites were struggling for supremacy in her hat and dress and scarf, and the result was hopeless and inextricable confusion. So he found a plain answer to her first question difficult.

"I'm all right to-day, ain't I, Enoch? I thought you'd like this hat."

She had bought it in the side street of a suburb, attracted by the label which announced its Parisian extraction. It was a mixture of red, lilac and purple—and her dress was green. Strone nodded bravely.

"Very smart indeed," he answered. "I've been thinking, though, Milly, I don't allow you enough for your clothes. If you like we'll do some shopping this afternoon."

She was willing enough.

"But what about the matinee? I want to see that girl at the Palace."

"We'll go this evening," he said. "I need not be at the House until late. I should like to choose a dress for you."

She regarded him suspiciously.

"You're afraid I shouldn't know what to get alone, eh?"

He laughed at her and adroitly changed the subject. Strone had ordered an excellent luncheon—champagne, and the band was playing gay music. He honestly did his best to enjoy himself—to make her enjoy herself. So far as she was concerned he succeeded.

"I like this immense," she declared, when the coffee was brought, and Strone lit a cigar. "I should like to do this every day."

"Good for my work," he laughed.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Not much else you think of but your work. I want a liqueur, Enoch. Some brandy."

She drank it off and looked longingly at her empty glass.

Strone paid the bill and rose hastily.

"Come along," he said. "I have been to the bank this morning. We will try and spend some money."

They took a hansom and drove to Bond Street. It was a trying afternoon for Strone. Milly was not always reasonable. She had a hankering, which she did not attempt to conceal, for the most daring essays in colour and the most advanced styles. Most of their

purchases were compromises, but after all Milly was only human. She became the possessor of a completely new wardrobe, and Enoch had shown his interest by helping in the choice of everything. She drove home in high good humour, and allowed Strone to select for himself her evening gown.

They went to the Palace, where Strone soon wearied of the performance, whilst Milly was delighted. Once she turned impatiently to him.

"You look as sober as a judge," she exclaimed. "Why don't you laugh? It's funny enough, ain't it?"

"Well, I don't know," he answered, doubtfully.

She tossed her head.

"Too frivolous for you, I suppose," she remarked. "You're a poor one at enjoying yourself."

She turned her back to the stage, but her pleasure was damped. It flashed across her mind how Dick and Emmie Mason would have enjoyed with her the somewhat doubtful song whose humour Strone had failed to catch. She sighed heavily. Was it to be like this always?

Nevertheless, it had been a gala day for her, and she was more than usually good-humoured when Strone put her into a hansom and bade her good-night.

"Can't you chuck the House for one night?" she asked, suddenly, making room for him beside her. "Come on home with me."

He shook his head.

"I've had my play," he answered. "Now comes the work. Good-bye, I shan't be late."

She nodded, and the cab drove off. Strone stood on the pavement and drew a long breath. The cool night air was delicious, the sense of freedom a luxury. His last words came back to his mind. He laughed bitterly, and turned towards Westminster.

CHAPTER VII.

Strone had embarked upon a career in which reputations are swiftly made and lost. His own never wavered from the night of his first great speech. Chance made his little party a very important factor in the political history of the next few months. Chance also made his own share in the struggle a great and arduous one. For this little handful of men sent to represent the vast interests of the democracy were mostly of the type of Fagan and his class. Earnest enough and steeped with the justice of their cause, they were yet in many ways marvellously narrow-minded. Obstruction and clamour seemed to them their most natural and reasonable weapons. They did not understand Strone's methods, his broader views, his growing friendship with Lord Sydenham and the more enlightened members of the Government. To them he seemed always to be losing golden opportunities. More than once he helped the Government out of a tight corner without demanding anything in the shape of a recompense. They failed altogether to understand how Strone was building up in the regard of thoughtful men both in the House and throughout the country an immensely increased respect for the new social doctrines of which he was the exponent and the little party of which he was the recognised leader.

Strone himself knew that the thing could not last.

Nothing but sheer force of will and the expenditure of much persuasive eloquence kept his followers faithful to him. Day by day the tension grew more acute. He was never actually sure of their allegiance until the division bell had rung. One or two waverers had already taken up an independent attitude. Fagan himself seemed to be contemplating something of the sort. No wonder that in those exciting times he reverted to his old attitude towards Milly. There were no more shopping excursions or visits to music-halls. Dimly he began to realise what the future might have held for him. In those days he set his heel grimly upon all the poetry and the sweeter things of life. He refused numerous political and general invitations. He avoided every place as much as possible where he was likely to meet Lady Malingcourt.

One night he was walking home earlier than usual when he caught a glimpse of her in Piccadilly. A brougham passed by and he saw her leaning back with pale face and listless eyes. He bent forward eagerly, and a moment afterwards regretted it. For she saw him and immediately pulled the check string.

He threaded his way amongst the stream of vehicles to where her carriage remained on the other side of the road. A footman opened the door for him. She gathered up a snowy profusion of white satin skirt and made room for him by her side.

"You are my salvation," she murmured, with a faint smile. "Please hurry."

He hesitated.

"But ——"

An imperious little gesture. He was by her side, and the door was softly closed.

"To Amberley House, your ladyship?" the man asked, glancing discreetly at Strone's grey clothes and soft hat.

"Home."

The carriage rolled away. Strone leaned back with a long drawn sigh.

"You have saved me," she said, "from suicide—or something equally disagreeable. I was going to the Duchess of Amberley's reception."

"And now?"

"We are going home. We are going to sit upon my balcony and listen to the lime trees. You are going to talk to me, and we will imagine that we are in Gascestershire."

He said nothing for the moment. Presently he looked at her. She was more than ordinarily pale, and there were faint lines under her eyes. The shadow of a great weariness was upon her face.

"What do you do it for?" he asked, suddenly.

"My friend," she answered. "I do not know. My feet are upon the treadmill, and I move them. Do not look at me like that. These glaring evenings are horrible. You can see that I am getting old."

He smiled.

"You do not look well," he said, "but it is weariness and not age which is stealing upon you."

"It is true," she answered. "Tell me how to avoid it."

"Work."

"Work? That is so vague. You are not properly sympathetic," she murmured.

The carriage stopped before the corner house of a handsome square. They passed up the steps together.

"This is your first visit to me," she remarked, "and you have had to be dragged here. We will go upstairs."

They passed through a dimly-lit drawing-room, the air of which seemed to Strone faint and sweet with the perfume of many flowers, out on to a shaded balcony, over which was a long striped awning. In the corner were two low basket chairs. She sank into one, and motioned him to take the other.

"This," she murmured, "is luxury. Smoke if you will—and talk to me. Tell me how you are getting on in the House."

"None too well," he answered, gloomily. "I am all the while upon the brink of a volcano—and somehow I do not fancy that it will be long before the eruption comes."

"What do you mean?" she asked, turning her pale face towards him. "I do not understand. I cannot believe that there is anyone in the House whose position is more secure than yours."

He smiled grimly.

"My party," he said, "are thinking of dropping me!"

"What?"

"My party," he repeated; "Fagan and his following, you know, are in a state of smouldering revolt. They find fault with me constantly. I cannot make

them understand my aims or my methods. They have come to the conclusion that I am dazzled by the notice of my superiors."

"Your superiors!" she murmured, scornfully. "Who are they?"

He laughed. Her little speech had been too vigorous for flattery.

"Never mind! They have their own ideas, and I do not conform to them. They think that a labour leader should be a thorn in the side of everyone, and should certainly not accept invitations for dinner."

"Such rubbish!"

"Exactly! But they are very much in earnest, and it may be my fate at any time to find myself devoid of a following. They want me to imitate the tactics of the Irish Party."

She nodded.

"Well," she said, "let them throw you over. Who but themselves would suffer! Personally, I believe that your association with them is only a drag upon you."

"That is all very well," he answered. "They are a rough lot, I know, and most of them fatally ignorant. I do not believe that any class of men in the world are so girt about with prejudices as those whose eyes have been opened a little way. But, after all, they each have a vote, and as parties are at present they are an immensely powerful factor in the situation."

"That," she said, "is only a temporary matter, a matter of weeks or months. After all, you must remember they are an isolated body of men in the

House. Your place is with the only great parties of progress. You are moving towards them day by day. Your joining them sooner or later is inevitable."

He smiled.

"Lord Sydenham has been very kind to me," he said, "but I fancy I should be a sort of ugly duckling amongst the Conservatives."

"You would be in office in less than twelve months," she declared. "Do let me tell Sydenham that he may talk to you about this."

He shook his head.

"I came into the House as a Labour Member," he said, "and unless something unforeseen happens a Labour Member I must remain. Besides, I hate to think of myself as a party man. The rank and file remind me most unpleasantly of a flock of geese. They must follow their leaders blindly, their personal opinions go for nothing."

Her eyelids quivered—the merest flicker of a smile passed across her face.

"But how nice not to be obliged to have personal opinions! Think what a delightfully restful state."

"It would not suit me," he declared, bluntly.

She laughed, very softly, and very musically.

"That I am sure it would not," she agreed. "You are such a vigorous, independent person. You will never prove an unmixed delight to whichever party you finally join."

"In time," he answered, thoughtfully, "I, too, shall probably succumb, and learn to think with the brains of other people. But just now I am a rebel. It seems

to me that the hardest part of Parliamentary life is the inevitable loss of individuality. It is a sort of suicide."

"I do not believe that it is inevitable," she declared. "It is hard to retain it, I know; but the man who succeeds finds his way into high places."

There was a short silence. A breath of the west wind bent the lilac boughs towards them, a wave of delicate perfume floated in the air. Strone half-closed his eyes. Their thoughts went backward together.

"Tell me," she murmured, "how does this life compare to you with the old days at Bangdon Wood? You were a man of contemplation—you have become a man of action."

"I was a free man, and I have become a slave."

Her fan of white feathers gleamed softly through the growing darkness. Her eyelids drooped.

"You have passed into a wider and a greater life. You are in the way of realising the best ambitions which can come to a man. Life is all wonderfully different to you."

He sighed.

"There are times," he said, "when I fancy that I am grasping at a shadow, when it scarcely seems worth while to accomplish anything. For the end of it all is the same."

"You talk," she murmured, "as a woman might talk whose ambitions are born only to be strangled at their birth. For you there is no harking back. What is better in life than power, the consciousness of writing one's name in unchanging letters across the face of

one's generation? Go on, my friend. There is a kingdom before you."

He turned a weary face upon her.

"These are the things," he said, "which I have told myself. But, Lady Malingcourt, life has another side, and to go through life without once glancing upon it—"

"Ah, is it worth while?" she interrupted. "What is greater than power?"

"It is a joy for heroes, but even heroes are sometimes men."

They were silent for a moment. From beyond the square came the tinkle of bells, the low roar of traffic surging westward. Near at hand was the rustling of the evening wind in the large-leaved lime trees, the faintly drawn out music of a violin from one of the adjoining houses.

"Tell me," she asked, suddenly, "—about your wife. Does she like London. Is she interested in your work?"

A curious restraint—almost a nervousness—fell upon them both.

"I do not think that she is," he answered. "London does not suit her very well. She is not quick at making acquaintances."

He did not allude to her again, nor did she. The vision of Milly rose up before him as he had seen her last. He sat looking out in the twilight with stern, set face. Lady Malingcourt watched him. Perhaps they both saw in the soft darkness some faint picture of those wonderful things which might in time have

come to pass between them. For when Lady Malingcourt spoke again there was a sweetness in her voice which was strange to him.

"You yourself," she said. "Do you think that you do well to ignore the social side of life? You do not go anywhere. It is not for lack of invitations. Believe me, in political life to-day there are many strings which are pulled behind the curtain."

"I am a labour leader," he answered, simply, "and there is no place for me in the society you speak of. The handful of votes which I command to-day, are all very well, but they may be gone to-morrow."

She leaned forward eagerly. The cloud of weariness had passed from her face. Her white bejewelled fingers touched his coat sleeve.

"My friend," she said, "you are making a rare but a fatal mistake. You undervalue yourself. Do not shake your head, for I know what I am talking about. Lord Sydenham has spoken to me; there have been others, too. There are many people who are watching you. You must not disappoint them."

He gazed into her intent face and sighed.

"Sometimes," he said, in a low tone, "I think that it is my fate to disappoint myself, and all other people. Lady Malingcourt, can you tell me why it is that now when many of the things I have dreamed of are becoming realities, my desire for them seems sometimes honeycombed with weakness? I find myself confronted by that horrible distaste for life—what shall I call it?—mental lassitude, faint heartedness, an evil thing but hideously powerful. Often lately I have

wished myself back at my cottage, I have closed my eyes, and the old days of poverty, of freedom, have seemed wonderfully sweet. It is weakness," he went on, a sudden hoarse passion in his voice, "cursed weakness. I will stamp it down. I shall outgrow it. But it's there, and it's a live thing."

Afterwards he liked to think of her as she had seemed that night. The weariness, the flippancy of her outlook upon life seemed for the moment to have fallen away like a mask. The woman shone out,—flamed in her eyes, was manifest in her softened tone.

"It is the toll we all have to pay," she said. "We expect too much of life. The things which look so beautiful to us when we are hammering at the gates crumble into dust when we have passed through into their midst, and seek to grasp them."

"Is there nothing in life," he said, "which is real—which remains?"

She did not answer him, her silence was surely purposeful. She sat with half closed eyes as though listening to the music of the breeze-shaken limes, and Strone felt his heart beating madly. The significance of his question and her silence were suddenly revealed to him. A mad desire possessed him to seize her hands, to force her to look at him. Instinct told him that the moment was propitious, that the great gulf between them was bridged over by a sudden emotional crisis, which might never occur again. He had found her the victim of a mood, marvellously plastic, marvellously alluring. Her silence, her averted eyes, the quick rising and falling of her white bosom were like

wine to his timidity. He drew nearer to her. Then from the street below came an interruption. A furiously driven hansom was pulled up, a man sprang out, glanced upwards and waved his hand. A curse trembled upon Strone's lips. Lady Malingcourt sat up and returned his greeting.

"So like Sydenham," she murmured. "However he may have loitered on the way; he always arrives in a desperate hurry."

CHAPTER VIII.

Strone and Lord Sydenham came face to face in the hall—the latter recognised him with amazement.

“Was it you whom I saw with my cousin?” he asked.

“Yes,” Strone answered. “I was just leaving. Good-night.”

“Wait a moment,” Lord Sydenham exclaimed. “I wanted to see you particularly. Come upstairs again.”

“All right at the House?” Strone asked.

Lord Sydenham laughed curiously.

“That depends on how you look at it,” he answered. “The division came off after all.”

“I was paired,” Strone said, quickly.

“I know! But your men went solid with the opposition.”

Strone stood still in blank amazement. It had come then—already. Lord Sydenham watched him and was satisfied. He led the way into the drawing room. Strone followed like a man in a dream. He heard a greeting pass between the two. Their first few sentences were unintelligible to him.

“What an unwarrantable hour, my dear Sydenham, to throw yourself out of a hansom upon my doorstep. You ought to consider my reputation with old Lady Snabell. She is my next door neighbour.”

“Hang Lady Snabell, and all such odd cats,” he

answered, lightly. "I have come to tell you of our new majority. We have just secured it upon an unexpected division. One!"

She was suddenly grave.

"Do you mean it, Sydenham?"

"All Fleet Street," he answered, "is hammering it into type. To-morrow you will see it with a black headline and a leading article. We can't last a month."

"Was it sprung upon you?"

"No! Strone's men went with the opposition."

Strone caught up his hat.

"I will go and find Fagan," he said. "He is either an imbecile or a scoundrel."

Lord Sydenham shook his head.

"Too late now," he declared. "It's almost midnight. Sleep on it, Strone. There's something behind, no doubt."

Strone was white with rage.

"The miserable fools," he muttered. "This is the result of their bickerings and distrust. All I have been striving for must go for nothing."

He stood with clenched hands, his head thrown back, his eyes ablaze with anger. He had been deceived and tricked, and by the very men whose cause in his hands was becoming a religion. It was ignoble. The man and the woman watched him curiously. Lord Sydenham lit a cigarette and sat down.

"Strone," he said. "I don't blame you. I'm sure you knew nothing of it. I've been uneasy about Fagan for some time. Those fellows ain't used to hav-

ing a man with ordinary commonsense for a leader. After all, they can only hasten matters. We must go to the country in the autumn, and we shall come back with a larger majority than ever. The question I'm most interested in at this moment is—what are you going to do?"

"I do not know," Strone answered, bitterly. "A unit is of no account in Politics. They have bound my hands just as the work was beginning to grow. I do not think that I shall stand again."

Lord Sydenham smoked in silence for a moment or two.

"Strone," he said, "I will be frank with you. I believe that your career as an independent Labour Member is over. I do not think that your constituency would return you again in the face of this revolt of your party. Well, you should have had your lesson. You are a man of common-sense. You must see for yourself that however great their cause, and whatever may be the class of men attracted to it throughout the country, the Labour Party, as it is represented in the House, is a rank delusion. You have nothing in common with Fagan, and his crew. They talk rot, and you know it. They have neither discretion nor sense. They clamour for the impossible like a lot of children. They ask for so much that they never have the slightest chance of gaining anything. Their methods are irrational, and they are not even trustworthy."

Strone smiled grimly.

"Pity Fagan isn't here," he remarked. "He's very sensitive to criticism."

"It would give me great pleasure," Lord Sydenham said, "to repeat my words to him. I have an immense respect for the principles which they are supposed to represent, but I must own to thoroughly disliking Fagan and his clique. They are lacking in the first elements which make for success in political life. They have neither stability or self-restraint. I defy you, Strone, or any man to make anything of them."

"My opportunity is gone," Strone said. "They have thrown me over."

"It is a proof," Lord Sydenham answered, "of their colossal folly. As for you, Strone, it will be the making of your political career. Come, we are perhaps keeping Lady Malingcourt up. I will walk a little way with you and explain what I mean."

Lady Malingcourt rose up and moved towards the door.

"That is a very polite way of hinting that you are going to talk secrets," she remarked. "Sit here as long as you like though. I rather like the idea of my little drawing-room being used for the hatching of a political conspiracy."

"We will not be guilty of such sacrilege," Lord Sydenham declared, rising. "It is late, and I shall have a busy day to-morrow. I am going to walk part of the way home with Strone."

They passed out into the cool night. Lord Sydenham removed his hat and walked for some distance, carrying it in his hand. Suddenly he turned to his companion.

"Strone," he said. "You must join us."

Strone laughed—enigmatically.

"I am handicapped," he remarked, "with principles. Besides, imagine the horror with which your old-fashioned Conservatives would regard my social schemes. It is impossible."

"I hope to convince you," Lord Sydenham said, earnestly, "that it is nothing of the sort. In the first place, I want you to remember that during the last ten years a marvellous change has transformed the relative positions of the two great political parties. The advent of the Liberal Unionists into our ranks was the consummation of what was fast becoming inevitable. To-day it is the Conservative Party who are the party of progress. It is the party to which you must naturally belong."

"I will grant what you say about the new Conservatism. At the same time, there are many important points on which you and I would be very far apart."

"Assuming for the moment," Lord Sydenham went on, "that you secured a seat in the new Parliament as an Independent Labour Member, have you considered your absolutely hopeless position? You would have little if any following. You would be, to speak plainly, an impotent and ineffective force. Your life would be frittered away in making speeches to which no one would listen and elaborating schemes which must remain for ever in the air."

"Well!"

"I do not attempt to defend our present system of Government," Lord Sydenham continued, "but it exists, and it will continue to exist for your time and

mine. I believe you to be something of a philosopher, Strone, and I put it to you, therefore, whether it is not better to adapt oneself to circumstances which are existent and unassailable rather than to stand on one side and sulk because the end we desire cannot be attained by the exact means which recommend themselves to us. As an independent member, you will be absolutely powerless. Therefore I say join us—on these terms."

Strone laughed loud and long. A policeman looked over his shoulder at them, a passer-by turned round.

"Is this a joke?" Strone asked. "How could you welcome such a firebrand amongst your well ordered ranks? I should be a cuckoo in the nest with a vengeance."

It was Lord Sydenham's turn to smile.

"You alarm me," he said. "Your natural history carries you so far no doubt as to remember what follows the advent of the cuckoo. Do me the credit, Strone, to believe that I am not making you this offer without serious consideration, and I am not making it upon my own initiative alone. I know very well that you are no hare-brained socialist. You do not preach the nationalisation of the land or any such foolery. You know very well that no human laws can make equal men born into the world with diverse gifts. As for the rest, I can assure you that the thinking men of my party are as eager as you are for the betterment of the poor. Some of your own pet schemes will be part of our programme for next session. Join us and you shall take charge of these measures. You will

strengthen us, and you will give the people in the great manufacturing centres confidence in our desire to legislate for them. You yourself will be in the position to do effective work which you could never attain to by any other means. We believe in you, Strone, and your motives. I do not wish to appeal to your personal ambition in any way, but—we will make you the youngest Cabinet Minister since the days of Pitt.”

A very rare agitation shook Strone’s voice. He seemed to be looking no longer along the broad gaslit street, he saw down the avenues which lead to fame and high places, he saw the passionate dream of his earlier youth which of late had seemed so shadowy, so difficult of achievement, suddenly leaping into actual and vivid life.

“You have taken my breath away,” he said. “But your party discipline is so arbitrary. I might find myself hopelessly at variance with you on some point or other—I could not pledge myself to unswerving service.”

“We would not exact it of you,” Lord Sydenham answered, quietly. “As your political life grows so will your experience, and you will understand that of necessity life is made up of compromises. This is your street, is it not? I am going to leave you to think over what I have said. I do not press you for any immediate answer.”

Strone held out his hand.

“You are very good, Lord Sydenham,” he said. “It is useless, I suppose, to ask you to come in.”

Lord Sydenham nodded. “But I should like a

cigar," he added, suddenly, feeling his breast pocket. "I will come to your doorstep."

At the gate Strone looked up in quick surprise. It was one o'clock, and he had never doubted but that his house would be in darkness. The drawing-room, however, seemed to be a blaze of light. Whilst they stood there a man's voice singing a comic song came traveling out to them. It was not a particularly choice one, even of its order, and the man's voice was harsh and repulsive. At the close of the first verse the shrill laughter of women drowned the pianoforte. Lord Sydenham glanced at his companion. Strone's face was suddenly pale, and the hand which still rested upon the gate seemed striving to bend the wrought ironwork.

"On second thoughts," Lord Sydenham remarked, "I will smoke a cigarette. I have my case. Good-night, Strone."

"Good-night, Lord Sydenham!"

CHAPTER IX.

Strone walked slowly up the steps, let himself in with his latchkey, and stood for a moment in the hall before the drawing-room door. The noise inside was unabated, his entrance had been unobserved. He was strongly tempted to pass upstairs to avoid a scene which he knew quite well would be repulsive to him. Then the sound of a man's voice, his wife's Christian name, her shrill reply, decided him. He opened the door and entered.

It was all very much what he had expected—and dreaded. The room was full of tobacco smoke. In the centre a card table strewn with cards and cigar ash, empty champagne bottles, decanters, and a medley of glasses. Milly was sitting upon the sofa, and by her side Dick Mason, his face flushed to an ugly red, his arm in suspicious proximity to Milly's waist. His sister, in an outrageous pink gown, was sharing the piano stool with a young man whose face seemed repulsively familiar to Strone. Their giggling ceased at his entrance. Dick Mason removed himself with clumsy stealthiness from Milly's side. Milly alone seemed unmoved. She sat quite still and eyed him defiantly. Her cheeks were flushed, her hair untidy, and she was smoking a cigarette.

"Well," she said, "home early, ain't you?"

"It is past one," he answered, briefly. "How do you do, Miss Mason?"

He shook hands with her and nodded to her brother. Then he glanced at the young man on the music stool, and there was an awkward silence. Milly and Ada Mason exchanged glances. The latter began to talk volubly. The young man on the music stool smiled in a sickly fashion and began to turn over the leaves of his song book.

"We've been keeping your wife company for a bit, Mr. Strone," she said. "Such horrible hours you Parliament gentlemen keep. I shouldn't be able to do with my husband out till this time of night always. You must find it very dull, dear," she added, turning to Milly. "I am sure it would send me crazy unless I had a lot of nice lively friends."

Milly laughed heartily.

"Oh, we're supposed to get used to it, ain't we, Enoch? Don't stand there looking so solemn. Sit down and be sociable, do."

Strone did not move. Miss Mason rose with a toss of the head, which completed the dishevelment of her hair.

"I don't think Mr. Strone looks very much inclined to be sociable, Milly dear," she said. "Come on, Dick. We'd better be moving."

Her brother rose with alacrity, also the other young man. Milly pressed more drinks and cigars upon them, and bade them good night in boisterous fashion, reminding them of an engagement for the next night. Strone opened the front door and shook hands with

Ada Mason and her brother. But when the young man who had accompanied them tried to slink by Strone's hand fell upon his shoulder like a vise.

"Listen," he whispered. "If ever I find you here again I shall thrash you, you understand. You little cur."

The young man muttered something inarticulate and shuffled off. Strone closed the door, and returned to the drawing-room. Milly was there, stretched upon the sofa. She raised herself a little at his coming. She faced him with the old defiance in her eyes.

"Well!"

Strone looked meditatively around the room. Its condition and everything in it grated upon him. He stood with his elbow resting upon the mantel-piece, thinking. Once more Milly addressed him.

"Well! Got anything to say, eh? Out with it!"

He roused himself with an effort.

"There is a good deal to be said," he answered.

"The question is whether it is worth while. Do you like this sort of thing, Milly?"

"Why not? I must have friends. I can't sit here alone—night after night."

"You can come down to the House."

"And listen to a lot of dry rot! No thanks!"

"You can take one of the maids and go to the theatre."

"Thanks. I tell you I ain't so fond of my own company, or of going round with servants."

"It seems to me, at any rate," he said, "that you could spend the time better than this."

"Oh, you're a fine judge," she cried, passionately. "You go your way, better let me go mine. What do you care who my friends are, or how I pass the time? Not a scrap! It's only your beastly stuck up vanity which makes you say a word about it. You think the Masons ain't class enough to come to your house. I don't care. They're good enough for me."

"You are wrong," he answered, coolly. "I will not have a young man come here who sits with his arm around your waist. I won't say I'm surprised, Milly—but I am disgusted."

"I thought you'd have something to say about that," she answered. "Where's the harm, anyway? Dick Mason and me are old pals. And what right have you to interfere, anyway? What sort of a husband are you to me, Enoch Strone, eh? Supposing I let him put his arm round my waist, or kiss me, what call have you to complain? We're a nice affectionate couple, ain't we? How do I know you ain't got someone you fancy? How do I know that ain't the reason you treat me, your wife, Enoch—like the dirt beneath your feet?"

Her voice had risen in strength, gained in passion at every syllable. She was on her feet now, facing him with blazing eyes. It seemed to Strone in that awful moment of self-revelation that she had become the accuser, that he himself was responsible for this loathsome scene, for all her follies, for all the follies which she might hereafter commit.

"You are mistaken, Milly," he cried, hoarsely. "I have not treated you, I have not thought of you like that."

She had the upper hand. Heedless of how she had gained it she pushed home her advantage. Her words lashed him like scorpions.

"Rot! You do! You have done every day. Do you think I ain't like other women—because if you do, you're wrong. You think that because you don't beat me, give me money and clothes and a roof that that's the end of it. Look 'ere! I shouldn't mind your beating me, I shouldn't mind if you got drunk, I shouldn't mind going to the pawnshop with all our fine things if—if—now and then you cared a bit, Enoch."

"I have been wrong, Milly," he muttered. "I didn't know that you felt it—like this!"

"Didn't know! How much did you care, eh? Enoch, perhaps I'm hard on you. You didn't want to marry me. I made you. More fool me. Give me a little money and I'll go away and live my own life amongst my own people. I can't go on like this any longer."

He set his teeth—crushed down a whole world of beautiful dreams, and faced his destiny.

"I have been wrong, Milly," he repeated. "We will let bygones be bygones. I will do my best to make you a better husband."

She crept slowly towards him.

"I ain't good enough for you, Enoch," she faltered, "and lately I've given up trying. It hasn't seemed any use. You've so many fine friends, and you're so clever, I feel somehow as though I were keeping you back. Better let me go away, Enoch. I'll change my name. I shan't ever disgrace your's."

"Rubbish," he answered, with an attempt at lightness. "We'll make a fresh start. . . . You mustn't talk about going away."

He drew her to the sofa and kissed her. She sobbed herself to sleep upon his shoulder. Strone sat there with the dead weight of her body against his, a cold and terrible vigil. His eyes were fixed upon the disordered table, strewn with cards and cigar ash, the wine stains and empty glasses. The woman by his side slept like a little child.

CHAPTER X.

Once again Milly felt herself taken at a disadvantage. She looked over the top of her novel from the sofa where she lay, and then rose slowly to her feet. She barely touched the tips of Lady Malingcourt's fingers.

"I have been meaning to come and see you for so long," Lady Malingcourt said in her quiet, even tone. "Please don't disturb yourself. May I sit here? Now I want you to tell me how you like living in London? It is such a change after Bangdon, isn't it?"

Milly sat on the edge of the sofa. She wore an untidy dressing-gown, and she was conscious of it. Lady Malingcourt was, as usual, perfectly dressed.

"I don't think I care very much for London," Milly said, slowly. "There are a great many people here, but they ain't very sociable. Bangdon was lonesome, but I think I liked it best. You came to see me there, didn't you?"

Lady Malingcourt nodded.

"Yes! I am Mr. Martinghoe's sister, you know. We have both been very much interested in your husband's career. You must be very proud of him."

Milly's face darkened into downright sulkiness.

"I don't know as I am," she answered, slowly. "It's all very well, his being a Parliament man and that, but

I sometimes think it makes him forget he's got a home at all. I don't see nothing of him now. Every night he's out till the Lord knows what time, and I've got to sit here all alone."

"Still, you must like reading his speeches," Lady Malingcourt suggested. "Of course, you have been to hear him. My cousin is in the Cabinet, you know, and he thinks Mr. Strone quite one of the most promising debaters in the House."

"No, I've never heard him speak," Milly answered. "I read what he said once, but I couldn't understand a word of it. You see," she added, a little defiantly, "I was a factory girl before he married me, and I didn't have no education to speak of."

Lady Malingcourt was a little nonplussed. She could not fail to see that Milly's attitude was belligerent. Nevertheless, she was there with a definite purpose before her, and she meant to go through with it.

"It is so easy to pick up things nowadays," she murmured, "and I think that all men like their womenkind to be interested in their concerns, don't you?"

"No, I don't!" Milly answered, bluntly. "I haven't noticed anything of the sort about Enoch, I can tell you! He never tells me a word. What I know about his life outside this house I hear from Mr. Fagan."

Lady Malingcourt raised her eyebrows a little.

"I do not think," she said, "that Mr. Fagan is a very good friend of your husband's!"

"And why not indeed?" Milly demanded. "I call Mr. Fagan a real sensible man. He don't go poking

his nose into the society of people who only want to make use of him. He minds his own business, in Parliament and out of it. That's the sort of man I like."

Lady Malingcourt declined a controversy.

"I only know Mr. Fagan politically," she remarked. "I had not formed a very high opinion of his talents. As a man of ability he is not, of course, to be compared with Mr. Strone."

"Maybe," Milly answered. "I don't know about that. I only know that he doesn't go running after people who ain't his sort. He's a workman sent to Parliament to represent workmen, and he doesn't forget it."

Lady Malingcourt smiled pleasantly.

"My dear Mrs. Strone," she said, "when you have been mixed up in politics as long as I have you will understand that a man's work does not begin and end in the House. Take your husband's case, for instance. He has become the recognised champion of some very important social movements. It is part of his task to bring round to his own way of thinking all people of influence and position. This he can only do by mixing in Society. I happen to know that at a dinner-party lately at Lord Sydenham's he completely won round the Duke of Massingham to his views upon a most important matter. The Duke, as you know, has the ear of the Upper House."

"Were you at that dinner-party?" Milly asked with blunt irrelevance.

Lady Malingcourt stared.

"Yes," she answered. "I was there. Why do you ask?"

Milly flinched from the challenge.

"Oh, nothing! I darsay you may be right, Lady Malingcourt. All I can say is that I hate the whole show. I wish Parliament and all the rest of it were at the bottom of the sea. I don't care a bit about them. I want my husband. I never see anything of Enoch from morning to night. That may be the fashion in Society. It isn't my idea of married life."

Lady Malingcourt was thoughtful.

"Mrs. Strone," she said, "I am sure you would not wish to be in any way a drag upon your husband. He is one of those few men to whom great things are possible, and we are all so much interested in him and his career. You must have a little patience with him just now. It is a very anxious time for him. You must let his friends try and amuse you a little. I want you to come and see me. We will have a little luncheon together quietly one day next week and drive——"

Milly interrupted her. She had risen to her feet, and was standing with her hand resting upon the table. Her hair was untidy, and her dressing-gown was carelessly fastened. She was not an attractive picture to look upon.

"I'm much obliged, Lady Malingcourt," she said, "but I'd rather not come. It's no good my playing at being a lady. I ain't one, and I shall never make one. Enoch knows that right enough. I should only be uncomfortable if I came to your house, and serve

me right. If you want to do me a good turn, and I don't know why else you came here, don't encourage Enoch to get mixing himself up with your people. I know he's different to me—but I can't help that. He married me! I'm his wife, and I want him. And all the while I know that there's something gradually drawing him away from me. It's going to these parties that's done it. He sees women, ladies who are more his sort, and it makes him colder and colder to me. He tries to be kind, but it hurts him. And he's mine—my husband! I won't have him taken away from me. He's mine—and I want him."

Milly, in a sudden paroxysm of jealousy, had betrayed herself. Her fierce tone, the angry gleam in her eyes, were unmistakeable. The matter had become a personal one. This was the woman whom she feared. A rare flood of colour streamed into Lady Malincourt's pale cheeks. She hated this ignorant woman—she hated herself for the impulse of generosity which had brought her here. She rose to her feet.

"I am afraid that I do not quite understand you, Mrs. Strone," she said. "The matter of your personal relations with your husband is, of course, no concern of mine. I wanted to offer you my friendship, to try and relieve a little the loneliness of which you complain. But ——"

Milly interrupted her.

"Can't you see that I don't want your friendship—or anybody's?" she exclaimed, bitterly. "I want my husband!"

Lady Malingcourt was very nearly angry.

"You must forgive me, Mrs. Strone, if I tell you that I think you are very unreasonable," she said. "You are, I imagine, fond of your husband. Don't you want to see him succeed—to realise his ambitions? You can do this best just now by forgetting yourself and your own desires. In years to come he will be grateful to you, he will remember this, and you will have the gratification of knowing that you helped him."

"I don't—want Enoch to be a great man," Milly sobbed. "I only want him to remember that he is my husband—and—and I don't want anybody to come between us."

She subsided on to the sofa, and mopped at the tears which were streaming down her face. Lady Malingcourt watched her for a moment in silence, a dishevelled, untidy woman, her limitations written plainly enough in her pretty, unexpressive face, puckered up just now into the semblance of a sulky child's. She glanced around the room, disfigured everywhere by Milly's lack of taste and love of bright colours. Then she straightened herself and her face hardened. Her first impulse of pity was gone. After all, it was the man who must suffer.

"I am sorry that I am not able to be of any service to you, Mrs. Strone," she said. "Good afternoon."

Milly heard her let herself out without stirring, heard the jingling of harness outside, and from behind a curtain watched her visitor drive away. Then she

sank back upon the sofa, and buried her head in a cushion.

“What does she like of her want—with my Enoch?” she asked, bitterly.

CHAPTER XI.

"Quite a senatorial pose, Mr. Strone. Really, I am not sure that I ought to interrupt. Only you see Lord Sydenham has left me alone with a terribly deaf old person, and I felt that I must either escape—or expire. Come and explain why you are not voting, and amuse me, if you can."

Strone was taken by surprise, but the length of her speech, and as usual she spoke very slowly, gave him plenty of opportunity to recover himself. He even found time to admire her wonderfully fitting grey gown and the beflowered hat, which a Parisian milliner had parted with unwillingly. Lady Malingcourt had the reputation of being the best dressed woman in London.

"You have had tea?" he asked.

"Ages ago. Shall we sit down here? I really have no scruples about leaving Sir Francis. He keeps fidgetting about with a blue book, and I believe he is going to ask a question or make a speech or something. Why are you not voting?"

"It is a minor question," he answered. "My vote is of no particular importance, and I happen to disagree most emphatically with both parties."

"Dear me, how unfortunate," she remarked. "Pol-

itics do seem such a muddle. I am quite sure that if I were a member I should join a party and vote as I was told. It must save so much trouble."

"I am quite sure you would not," he answered, smiling. "You would be up in rebellion in a fortnight."

"Well, we shall see," she said. "Once down at Bangdon I told you that I had tried most things in life—now I have found one other excitement. If this fails I think that I shall go into a nunnery. But for the present I am a politician."

He laughed outright.

"And your politics?"

"I am a progressive Conservative. I am looking forward to the General Election breathlessly. Remember too, please, that I am a person to be conciliated. I make no promises, but I might be inclined to canvass for anyone whom I thought worthy. By the bye, why have you not been to see me?"

He was silent. He hated falsehood, and to tell her the truth was impossible.

"Many things have happened to me since we met last," he said, slowly. "My little party has thrown me over. I am nothing but a Parliamentary waif. Last week I was in Gascester looking after my little colony there, and the week before I took my wife to Paris for a day or two."

She raised her eyelids ever so slightly.

"Yes! Did you enjoy it? Paris always seems to me so deadly dull at this time of the year."

"Our point of view," he remarked, "would not be

the same. We are both in reality trippers. We had never been there before. We saw the sights."

She yawned.

"Did you see them from a char-a-banc?"

"It was a matter of francs only," he assured her. "We had a victoria and a guide. My only private pilgrimage was to the graves of Abelard and Heloise. What an imaginative nation. Their tombs were fragrant with wet flowers."

"The Parisian proper," she remarked, "is the soul of romance. But to return to our discussion. Lord Sydenham has been talking to me of you. You are to be a feature of the new Parliament."

"He is very good," Strone answered, doubtfully. "I am afraid that I may be a very unsatisfactory one."

"You anticipate trouble. Believe me that allegiance to party is not half so difficult as it seems at first to a person of your temperament. There is a certain amount of elasticity about our opinions concerning everyone and everything. Besides, 'esprit de corps' is a factor to be reckoned with. It grows every hour after you have once been admitted to the ranks of an established party."

"You are very consoling," he said, "and you do not talk either like one who has just taken up politics for a new fad."

She smiled—a little wearily, and looked away into the dark slowly-flowing river, speckled here and there with glints of sunshine.

"I think," she said, "that I must have lived for a

very long time, for nothing which I take up comes to me wholly new. It is always a going back. Politics interested me once—when I was a child and my father was in the Cabinet. To-day I seem to be only the reflex of other people's opinions. I trust Sydenham more than anyone. I believe my cousin is the most brilliant and the most conscientious man of our party."

Strone agreed with her. Just then Lord Sydenham came out and threaded his way towards them through a maze of chairs and little tables. A sudden thought came to Strone. He watched Lady Malingcourt's face, watched her soft tired eyes, and the smile which for a moment transformed her face. His own face grew grey to the lips, a sick, cold fear was at his heart. Lord Sydenham was freely spoken of as the next Prime Minister—Lady Malingcourt was confessing to a new interest in politics. They were obviously on the best of terms. He looked away and watched the shipping with fixed, strained eyes, struggling to regain the mastery over himself which he had for a moment lost. Their heads were close together. They were talking confidentially. What more natural or more suitable? His head sank a little lower. It was as though something were amiss with his heartstrings. It was the complete realisation of his colossal folly.

Her voice broke in upon his silent moments of agony.

"I am trying to induce Lord Sydenham to play truant, and I think he is almost persuaded. We thought of an impromptu dinner at the Carlton. Will you come? I can easily get a fourth."

He turned round.

"I am sorry," he said. "I am afraid not."

She looked at him curiously. The last few moments had left their mark.

"Is anything the matter?" she asked. "You look white."

"Nothing," he answered. "The merest headache."

"Then we will cure it," she declared, gaily. "We will treat ourselves to the best dinner we can get, and go somewhere after. You can put off your engagement."

"I am afraid not," he answered. "I promised to take my wife out—if I could get away."

There was a moment's dead silence. Strone's answer fell almost like a bomb amongst them. At that moment an acquaintance touched Lord Sydenham on the shoulder and drew him a little apart. The two were alone.

"I am leaving town—very soon," she said, slowly, "and I believe that I have engagements for every night until I go. I should like you to come this evening."

He looked at her with suddenly flushed cheeks, his strong face transformed by a sudden passion.

"What does it matter to you," he said, hoarsely. "You will have your cousin. I shall be in the way."

She looked him full in the face from under the shadow of her parasol, her eyebrows slightly raised, her lips twitching as though with the inclination to smile.

"Foolish," she murmured.

Strone was ridiculously and speechlessly happy. Lord Sydenham rejoined them.

"It is all settled," she said, turning towards him. "We meet at the Carlton at eight o'clock."

"If it costs me my seat," Lord Sydenham answered, gaily, "I shall be there."

"And I," Strone echoed. "At eight o'clock."

Milly was waiting for him when he reached home, all ready dressed. She welcomed him noisily.

"Bravo!" she cried. "I'm dead tired of my own company. Let's go to the Troc., Enoch, eh?"

"I'm very sorry, Milly," he said, awkwardly. "I can't take you out to-night. I'm going to have dinner with Lord Sydenham."

Her face fell at once. Her lips quivered.

"I've given you every moment I could spare lately, Milly," he continued, hastily, "and we'll go somewhere to-morrow. I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I can't help it this time. Are my things put out?"

"Yes!"

He hastened up stairs. In a moment or two she followed him.

"I ain't going to mind—much, Enoch," she said. "Perhaps I'll take Lucy to the theatre. Got all you want?"

He looked up with a sudden pang of remorse. Tears and voluble complaints would have been better than this.

"Everything, thanks. Yes, take Lucy and go somewhere. I shan't be late home."

She nodded, watched him dress, followed him downstairs, and whistled herself for a hansom. She held up her lips and he kissed her, hating himself for the impulse of repulsion which swept through him.

"Good night, Enoch."

He looked back at the corner of the street. She was still standing there watching him.

CHAPTER XII.

They stood together under a tall palm, Lord Sydenham and Beatrice Malingcourt, and Lord Sydenham said something which had been in his mind for many days.

"I want you to tell me, Beatrice," he began, "what there is about this man Strone which attracts you so much."

The white feathers of her fan fluttered slowly backwards and forwards. She discovered that one of the ornaments on her bracelet had become unfastened, and she paused to secure it.

"Let me ask you a question, too," she said. "What is there about him which makes you so anxious to get him into your party?"

"Strone," he answered, "is a strong man and an earnest politician. He has practical and popular views on the great social question which the Government must face in a few years' time."

"He is a strong man," she repeated, thoughtfully. "Yes! I suppose that is it."

"But you," he remarked, "have acquired a reputation for exclusiveness—for hypercritical tastes as regards your associates, and especially your intimates. Now Strone, from a man's point of view, is admirable enough—but from your's, I do not understand."

The feathers fluttered gently for several moments. She bowed and smiled to some acquaintances who were passing into the restaurant.

"Why should my point of view," she said, "be so different from a man's? The small graces of life are very charming, but I am certainly not one of that order of women who place them above character. The man's social deficiencies are apparent enough. Yet I, who knew him when he was a workman pure and simple, am only astonished that they are not more apparent."

He looked thoughtfully into her impassive face.

"You are evasive," he murmured. "I wonder why!"

"And you," she answered, "have developed a woman's failing—curiosity. I wonder why!"

"I will ask you a question," he said, "which it should tax even your ingenuity to elude. Supposing that it were possible—would you marry Enoch Strone?"

The music rose and fell, the murmur of conversation around was like a pleasant babel. Lady Malingcourt remained impassive. Even Lord Sydenham, who was watching her closely, found her Sphinx-like.

"If the other considerations," she said, "were in order, and if by chance he should desire it—why not? He is a man, is he not—like you others."

"The other considerations! That includes, I suppose, caring for him?"

Lady Malingcourt became didactic.

"I have always considered," she said, "that a certain amount of affection is quite a desirable ingredient in matrimony. It is old fashioned, I suppose, but what else is left for us? Modernity has spread to Balham, and is quite a craze at Forest Hill. I think that we must all become old fashioned."

"I agree with you," he said, gravely, "that marriage should be something more than a bargain. And because I agree with you, Beatrice, I want you to marry me."

"I absolutely decline," she answered, "to be proposed to standing up."

"Then let us find a corner somewhere and discuss it," he answered.

She shook her head.

"I wonder," she said, "if by any chance you are in earnest."

"There is nothing in life," he answered, "which I have ever been so much in earnest about. I meant to wait until next session, but lately, I think there has been a change in you. To-night I decided that I would not wait any longer."

She looked at him thoughtfully. He was all that any woman could desire in a husband, rich, distinguished, handsome too, notwithstanding his stooping shoulders and pale cheeks. She had quite made up her mind to marry him—some day—a year ago. Now the desire had gone from her. Strone's appearance was a relief.

"Come and see me to-morrow," she whispered. "I want to think about it."

Strone joined them.

"Only two chairs," he said, "but there will be plenty of room directly. I have ordered coffee."

She followed him. Lord Sydenham excused himself for a few minutes and lingered to speak to some friends. He had all the self control of the carefully trained politician, but he did not care just then to talk to Strone.

The chairs were in a secluded corner. Lady Malingcourt leaned back with a little rustle of silken draperies.

"My friend," she said, softly. "I am going to ask you a peculiar favour. Do not speak to me for five minutes."

Strone nodded, lit his cigar, and looked out upon the gay throng of people. Lady Malingcourt from behind her fan watched him. Strone was well-groomed and well-dressed. There was very little in his appearance to distinguish him from the crowd of men by whom they were surrounded. A good tailor and innate good taste had secured him against solecisms—the small variations in his toilet from the prevailing fashion were rather a relief than otherwise. His hands were large and still a little coarse, but they were well cared for and well shaped. She studied his face, stern, hard, a trifle rugged but full of power, relieved from any suspicion of coarseness by a mouth as noble as a woman's, yet straight and firm. She judged him dis-

passionately, and found him good to look upon. No one could call him handsome, no one could pass him by without a second glance. She withdrew her eyes but remained silent. A curious emotion had seized her. The husk of life seemed to have fallen away. She felt younger, a curious longing stole into her heart for the hills at Bangdon, the soft west breeze, the song of the circling larks, the musical chirping of insects. Life seemed suddenly to have swelled into great proportions. She was frightened, nervous. She did not recognize herself. It was a moment of self-revelation, a single lurid sweet moment, the memory of which could never pass away. Then the crash of music, the murmur of voices, some trifling incident of her surroundings brought her back to the present. Only there was with her henceforth a new apprehension of things, the taste of life had suddenly possessed a sweeter and more potent flavour. Lord Sydenham's answer was no longer a matter of doubt. She sat up and sipped her coffee.

"I am ready," she declared, "to be entertained. You shall begin by telling me what you have been thinking about. Have any of these fair ladies taken your thoughts prisoners?"

"I have not seen them," he answered. "I have been thinking of Bangdon."

He could scarcely have said anything more in accord with her own frame of mind. She raised her eyes to his, and he was amazed at their wonderful

depth and colour. The change came home to him, and his own pulses beat fiercely.

"Let us talk about Bangdon," she said. "Do you remember the first time I saw you? John brought you in to dinner."

"If I had known," he remarked, smiling, "that there was a woman there I should have run for my life."

"Yet I do not think that you were shy. What a surprise you were to me. You wore the clothes of a mechanic, and you talked—as even John could never have talked. Do you know, I think that you are a very wonderful person. It is so short a time ago."

He turned towards her, and his face was suddenly haggard.

"It is a lifetime—a chaos of months and years. Let us talk of something else."

"No! Why?"

"Don't you understand?" he asked, fiercely.

There was a short, tense silence. The diamond star upon her bosom rose and fell. Lady Malingcourt did not recognise herself in the least. Only she knew that he at any rate had been swift to recognise the wonderful transfiguring change which that moment of self-revelation had wrought in her life. But for that she knew that his self-control would not have precipitated the crisis. A sort of glad recklessness possessed her. At least she had found, if only for a moment, something which filled to the brim the great empty cup of life.

"You are so enigmatic," she murmured.

"You had better not tempt me to be otherwise," he answered.

The delight of it carried her away. Their eyes met, and the memory of that moment went with him through life—to be cherished jealously, even when death came.

"Why not?"

"Because I love you. Because you know it! You have filled my life. You have made everything else of no account. I love you!"

CHAPTER XIII.

"Milly!"

No answer. Yet she was in the room, for he could hear her heavy breathing and trace the dim outline of her form upon the sofa. An ugly suspicion seized him. He turned up the gas and groaned.

Milly's sleep was a drunken one. Of that there was no manner of doubt. Her face was flushed, and her hair untidy. An empty tumbler lay on the ground beside her, the air of the room reeked with whisky. Strone bent over her, his face full of disgust, his heart full of evil thoughts. This was the woman to whom he was chained for all his days, whom he had pledged himself to love and cherish, the woman who bore his name, and who must rise with him to whatever heights his ambition and genius might command. There was no escape—there never could be any escape. He stood and looked at her with loathing in his eyes. He did not dare to wake her lest the passion which needed but the spark of a jeering word might overmaster him. So he walked restlessly up and down the room. The woman slept on.

Presently he saw that she had been writing—a

proceeding so unusual that he came to a standstill before the table. An envelope and a letter lay open there, the first words of the latter easily legible in Milly's round characters started him. He glanced at the address. It was to Mr. Richard Mason, Fairbanks, Gascester. Without any further hesitation he took the letter into his hand and read it.

Dear Dick,—The last time I saw you I turned you out of this house, because you asked me something as you didn't ought. I am writing these few lines to know if you are still in the same mind. I don't want you to make a mistake. I don't care one brass button for you—never shall. But things have turned out so that I ain't happy here. I never ought to have married Enoch, that's sure. He ain't the same class as you and me. He don't care for me, and he never will. That's why I reckon I'm going to leave him. Now if you want me to go to Ireland with you next journey say so, and I'll go. If I try to live here any longer I shall go mad. You ain't to think that it's because I like you better than him, because I don't, and no born woman in her right senses would. What I'm looking at is that if I go away with you he'll be free. That's all. There's no other way that I can think of, except for me to do away with myself, and that I dursn't do. So if you say come I shall be ready.—Yours,
MILLY.

The sheet of paper fluttered from his fingers. He turned to find her sitting up—watching him.

"You've been reading my letter," she cried, with a little gasp.

"Yes," he answered. "I have read it."

She stared at him, heavy-eyed, still dull of apprehension. There was a short silence. She struggled into a sitting posture, by degrees her memory and consciousness returned.

"I don't care if you have," she declared. "Put it in the envelope and post it. It would have been on the way by now if Mary hadn't brought in the whisky. It's what you want, ain't it? You'll be quit of me then and you can go to her."

He tore the letter across and flung it into the fire. She watched it burn idly.

"I don't know why you've done that," she said, wearily. "You know you want to be free. I don't know as I blame you. I saw you with her to-night."

"What do you mean?" he asked, quickly.

"Just that. I took Mary to the St. James's, and coming back we stopped to watch the people come out of the Carlton. She's very beautiful, Enoch, and she's your sort. I ain't. How you must curse the day when you first saw me."

There was a silence. Their eyes met, and the hopeless misery in her face went to his heart like a knife. In that moment he realised how only salvation could come to her. He crossed the room and sat down by her side.

"Milly," he said, gently, "let us try and talk like sensible people. I am afraid I haven't been a very

good husband to you, and this sort of thing"—he touched the decanter—"has got to be stopped. Now tell me how we are to turn over a new leaf. What would you like to do?"

She drew a little breath which became a sob

"It's me," she exclaimed, passionately. "I'm a beast. I ain't fit to be your wife, Enoch. Let me go my way. "I'll never interfere with you. You've been too good to me already. You can't care for me! Why should you!"

He took her hand in his.

"Milly," he said, "we are husband and wife, and we've got to make the best of it. Now I want you to promise to give up that stuff, and in return I will do anything you ask."

"Then care for me a little," she cried; "or if you can't pretend to, if you'd only kiss me now and then without me asking, act as though I were flesh and blood—treat as a woman instead of a ghost, I'd be easily satisfied. Can't you pretend just a little, Enoch? Maybe you won't mean it a bit—I don't care. I'd close my eyes and think it was all real."

Her voice broke down, her eyes were wet and shining with tears. He kissed her on the lips.

"I will do more than pretend, Milly," he said.

She came close to him—almost shyly. A look of ineffable content shone in her face.

"You're real good, Enoch," she murmured. "If only we were back at Bangdon."

"Would you like to live there again?" he asked.

"Rather. Enoch, I hate London! I hate it,

hate it! Take me back to Bangdon, dear. If only we could have your little cottage again and I could see after it for you. That's what I'd like. I wouldn't want any servant. I'd do everything myself and finish in time to walk down the lane and meet you. Enoch, I can smell that honeysuckle now. You began to teach me a bit about the flowers and birds. I wish we were living there now. I wish we'd never come away. I seem to have been drifting further and further away from you every day up here. It's a hateful place."

"I think I want a holiday," Strone said, quietly. "The Session is just over. We'll go down to Bangdon if you like."

"Enoch! Do you mean it?"

She threw her arms around his neck. She was rapturously happy, and Strone forced himself to turn a smiling face upon her.

"Why not?"

"And when you come back," she asked, timidly, "you won't leave me behind? I don't want to be anywhere without you, Enoch."

"It is very doubtful," he answered, "whether I shall ever come back. If I do you shall come too."

Milly drew one long, deep breath of happiness. It was her salvation.

CHAPTER XIV.

The woman was disturbed by the sound of voices, and because she was in a house where she was accustomed to take liberties and because both the voices were familiar to her she laid down her book and listened. The men who talked were Sydenham and Strone—the woman who listened was Beatrice Malingcourt.

"The thing is absurd," Lord Sydenham declared, with a note of anger in his thin, well modulated voice. "Your refusal I must accept if you insist. I should do so with less regret perhaps because sooner or later you must come to us. The step may seem a bold one to you to-day. In a year or so it will become inevitable. I might be content to wait, although you will be wasting some of the best years of your life. But when you tell me that you are giving up your career—leaving Parliament—going back to your manufacturing—oh, rubbish. I haven't the patience to argue with you."

"Don't try," Strone said, coolly. "It wouldn't be any use. I'm sick of politics—too much talk—too little progress. Why, it's the work of a lifetime to get the simplest measure passed through the House,—like trying to drive a tin tack into an iron-clad."

"For an independent member with no following, of course it is difficult," Lord Sydenham answered, impatiently. "Isn't that precisely why I want you to come to us?"

"You want me to sink my identity,—to become part of a machine, to pledge myself to support no end of measures I disapprove of. It isn't honest. I don't want to ram the truth down people's throats. I want to convince 'em."

"You talk like a crank, Strone. What's the use of kicking against the pricks? Party Government rules, and it will rule during your lifetime and mine. Disapprove of it if you like, but make use of it. You wouldn't refuse a priceless gift because the hand which offered it you wasn't clean."

"I'm not so sure of that," Strone answered. "Look here, Lord Sydenham, you're wasting time. It goes without saying that I'm grateful to you. I'll try to prove it. My mind's made up. I'm not open to argument. I've private reasons which are more powerful than my own feeling in the matter. There! Now let me go away. Label me a fool and forget me."

Lord Sydenham was silent. There was something behind then. He had suspected it all the while. His anger melted away. The pity of it moved him to make one more effort.

"Strone," he said, gravely, "those private reasons can be no concern of mine. I must not even allude to them. But let me ask you seriously whether you realise what you are doing. You have rare gifts—you have all the qualities of the successful politician.

I offer you a firm footing upon the ladder—your ascent is a certainty. I will not appeal to your personal ambition. I appeal to your religion.”

Strone looked up with a queer smile.

“My religion?”

“Yes! I use the word in the broadest sense. Consciously or unconsciously you have proclaimed it in your conversation—the House—the Reviews. If you are not one of those who love their fellow men, you, at least, have a pity for them, so profound that it has become the ‘motif’ of your life. It is a great cause, yours, Strone. You have made it your own. None but you can do it justice. Think of the submerged millions who have been waiting many years for a prophet to call them up from the depths. You have put on the mantle. Dare you cast it away?”

Strone’s face was haggard and his lips dry.

“I am not going into idleness,” he said. “I am going back amongst them. I have much to learn yet.”

Lord Sydenham interrupted him.

“Never in your life,” he said, “will there come to you such an opportunity as this. I offer you a place in the Party which will be in the majority next session—the lawmakers. I offer you also my own personal support of the labour measures we have discussed. It must be yes or no.”

“It must be no,” Strone said, slowly.

Lord Sydenham looked at him as one might gaze into the face of a Sphinx.

“Strone,” he said, “we have spoken together and

reasoned with one another as politicians and possible allies. Tell me—as a friend—man to man now—can I offer you my counsel, will you give me your confidence?”

There came to Strone a swift rush of feeling—of the surprised emotion felt once before in the little study at Bangdon Vicarage. Only this man was not John Martinghoe, and the floodgates of his speech remained locked.

“You are very kind, Lord Sydenham. I shall never forget it. My answer is final. It must be no.”

“In that case,” Lord Sydenham remarked, with a sigh, “there is nothing more to be said.”

Strone rose to go. A curtain fell, both men turned at the unexpected sound of Beatrice Malingcourt’s voice.

“There is something more to be said! Forgive me! I have been listening. Please go away, Sydenham. I am going to talk to Mr. Strone.”

CHAPTER XV.

They drove through the crowded streets side by side, Strone silent and impassive, Beatrice Malingcourt watching him through half-closed eyes, wondering with an almost passionate curiosity what things might be working in the brain of the man. What was his point of view, his code of morals?—he was a man, but instinctively she believed him to possess them! They had not met since the night at the Carlton. Something, she felt, had happened. Perhaps he regarded his self-betrayal as traitorous, their subsequent estrangement in view of it as a matter of course. It came home to her that the man's point of view was probably primitive. She smiled softly to herself. It was fortunate that she had been at Sydenham House. He was surely contemplating a gigantic, but unnecessary sacrifice—on her account.

The carriage drew up at the door. She led him upstairs into her little den, cool and perfumed with drooping clusters of Bangdon roses.

"I am at home to no one," she told her maid. "Let them serve tea in an hour."

She chose a chair for him and seated herself where a stray gleam of sunlight touched her hair. She herself was, as usual, perfectly dressed. Her muslin gown

was a miracle of spotless simplicity, the roses in her hat exactly the right pink for her complexion. She drew off her gloves and leaned forward.

"Now," she said, softly, "I am ready. What you would not tell Lord Sydenham you must tell me."

He sat for a moment with close drawn lips. She scarcely understood his dejection, the utter hopelessness of his aspect. For weeks he had avoided her—his manner now was constrained and difficult. Yet her eyes, her tone, the touch upon his arm as she had led him upstairs had all been intended for his encouragement. He could scarcely be so blind as not to see this.

"I told Lord Sydenham all that there is to be told," he said. "You heard me say that my retirement from the present political life was due to private reasons. I thought that you might have guessed. It is because of my wife!"

Lady Malingcourt gazed at him, speechless, more amazed than ever before in her life. Since her visit to Milly she had regarded her as an utterly hopeless person. In going she had acted upon an impulse which was undoubtedly a generous one. Milly should have her chance, and if she had shown herself in the least anxious to avail herself of it Lady Malingcourt would have made the greatest sacrifice of her life. But she had found Milly at her worst. She was surely an impossible companion for such a man as Strone. Already by her own showing he had realised it. She was a sore spot upon his life. No sane person would ever be able to blame him when the separation which

she believed inevitable should come to pass. Strone must know this! Because of his wife! What did the man mean?

"I do not understand," she said, blankly. "What has your wife to do with it?"

"I have promised her," Strone said, steadily, "to live at Gascester."

Lady Malingcourt was hopelessly bewildered. Strone's face was like a mask, but every line and furrow in it was deepened.

"Years ago," he continued, "you yourself spoke to me of my duty towards her. I have tried very hard to do it, and I have failed. Now I am going to try again. In London she is alone, and my work leaves me no time whatever to devote to her. I have promised to relinquish it to live at Gascester. Milly unfortunately has an unconquerable aversion to solitude, and I am afraid, too, that she has inherited one of the vices of her order. I am going to take her into fresh scenes, amongst fresh people—to help her fight her enemy. That is why I am forced to refuse Lord Sydenham's offer."

To Lady Malingcourt it was one of the most humiliating moments of her life. In many respects a vain woman, she had felt a certain amount of pride in her ascendancy over this strong man. She had flattered herself that her insight was unerring—his absolute devotion she had never for a moment doubted. He had come into her life at a critical moment, had found it empty, had excited from the first her strong interest. She was by no means an

emotional woman, very few men in the world had moved her to more than a passing curiosity. Her retirement to Bangdon had been chiefly due to a desire to escape from a society whose routine was fast becoming irksome to her. She was weary of the men paying her empty court, all fashioned from the same mould, hopelessly respectable, aristocratic and dull, or rouses with sapped health and blemished reputations. She had found in Enoch Strone a virility marvellously attractive, a fierce devotion which she had accepted at first with amusement, afterwards with feelings which she never dared to wholly admit, even to herself. His rapid rise had touched her imagination—she had counted herself his political inspiration. A woman of few affections, self-contained, and with a wonderful amount of self-control, it was amazing to herself that her stay in Australia with its many distractions never once disturbed in her mind the place which Enoch Strone had taken to himself. She had returned eager to meet him again—returned to find him also unchanged, and from that moment she had given herself up with the keenest pleasure to the development of their relations. His sudden self-betrayal on the night of the dinner at the "Carlton" had not displeased her. It was after all the natural prelude to a more sentimental phase of their friendship. His devotion supplied a very pleasant savour to life. It was fast becoming a necessity to her. She was too proud a woman to fear any danger for herself or from him. As for his wife—well, there had been a generous moment when she had been pre-

pared to face what would have been the greatest sacrifice of her life. She had gone to Milly prepared to make the best of her, even to the extent of her own self immolation. She had come away with a keen sense of relief. Nothing of the sort was necessary. Milly was wholly impossible. She strove to hide her feelings, but her voice vibrated with scornful anger.

"Your wife," she said, "has had her chance. You have done your duty to her. You have proved her to be an impossible companion. You have now an altogether higher duty—a duty to the nation and to your fellow-men. Do you mean to tell me that for the sake of a meaningless tie you are willing to sacrifice a career which may alter the lot of millions. You are a sane man and you propose this."

"There are others who can follow me—who can do my work here," Strone answered. "There is no one else who can save Milly from—hell."

"It is most surprising devotion," she said, quietly.

"There is no question of devotion," he answered.

"Milly is weak, incapable of enduring solitude, and with a cursed heritage from her father and mother. She has started on the downward path. I believe that I am the only person who can save her. Surely you of all people don't blame me."

"Why?"

"You are a woman. You know the end of it. How can I plead for my fellow human beings whilst the only one dependent upon me sinks before my eyes? Every lost creature in this world would look at me with her eyes and call to me with her cry of despair."

"You amongst the sentimentalists!" she exclaimed, softly. "My friend, there are limits even to your power. You cannot alter destiny, you cannot root out of human nature the things which are evil and grow flowers in their place. You set yourself a hopeless and a thankless task. Surely you will not go into exile, lose the esteem of your friends, your hold upon the great things of life, for the sake of an idea. It is worse than lunacy. It is a crime."

"You pleaded for her once. Would you have me leave her to her fate?"

"There are other means of providing for her," she answered, coldly. "You have done your best. Your duty is finished."

"If only I dared think so," he murmured.

Her hand rested upon his shoulder, her tone became one almost of pleading.

"You must not think that I am unfeeling," she said. "Indeed, I am not. Only your whole future is at stake. It is the question of your life's work against one unworthy woman. I wonder how you dare to hesitate."

"The woman is my wife," he answered. "Nothing can alter that. I know my duty. I've got to do it."

She rose slowly to her feet. Her face became hard and cold.

"Then there is no more to be said. Good-bye."

Her tone frightened him.

"What do you mean?" he cried, hoarsely.

"That you must take your choice between us. Oh,

be reasonable," she continued, in a suddenly softer tone. "You pretend to care for me, don't you?"

"Pretend? Oh, my God!"

"I won't let you wreck your life then for want of a few plain words," she continued. "I think that I, too, care for you a little—enough to promise you my faithful friendship, my companionship whenever you care for it. And—Enoch—whatever I may not give to you I promise that I will not give to anyone else."

There was a moment's tense silence—to Strone a moment of agony. The walls of the room had fallen away—it was night time, once more he stood amongst the shadows, watched her lean towards him, watched the white soft blossoms come falling through the darkness to his feet. Once more everything else in life was dwarfed and of no account beside his love for this woman. The man's passion went tearing through his veins. He held out his arms.

"Milly shall find her own hell," he cried, "only your hand must fill my cup of forgetfulness. Come!"

She shrank back, her cheeks flushed, her bosom rising and falling quickly. A new emotion had seized her. She had called up something which she was powerless to control. The warning of all the ages seemed burned upon the wall in letters of fire.

"You shall have your price—her soul and my eternal shame. You shall have them. I'll let her go—down the tide. Only you must share the burden with me. It will be our joint sin. Come! Have you courage enough? Do you dare to face it?"

The man was wonderful. She was almost carried

away. Yet she hesitated, and he read her mercilessly.

"You are not great enough," he cried. "In the days to come you would shrug your shoulders and say that it was her natural end. It's the brutal selfishness of your sex, and your class. If Christianity should ever turn out to be more than a dream God help you—and the others."

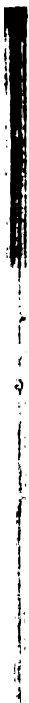
He moved to the door. On the threshold he paused. She was standing motionless. He could not tell whether she were angry or sorrowful.

"Forgive me," he said. "I said more than I meant to. You and I see things differently. The future may bring us nearer together. Good-bye."

He hesitated and passed out. She called to him, but it was too late. Before she could reach the stairs he had passed out of the house.



“ ‘ You are not great enough,’ he cried.” *Page 274.*



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CHAPTER XVI.

" Enoch."

" Well? "

" I want to give a party."

" Give one by all means."

" Yes, but a dinner party."

Strone shook his head.

" You can entertain your friends in any way you like, Milly, but you mustn't count on me. Stick to teas and luncheons."

Milly made a needless clatter with the coffee equipage. Her husband had vanished behind his paper. She leaned across the table to him.

" Enoch."

" Well? "

" Such a lot of people have asked us to dinner."

" We haven't been."

" No, but we've got to ask 'em back all the same. I know, because I've got a book that tells you all about it."

Strone laid down his paper. It was less than half-a-year since they had set up housekeeping in Gascester, but even those few months had left their mark upon him. There were new lines about his mouth, grey hairs showing here and there amongst the black. This was only one of a hundred little annoyances which confronted him every day.

"Milly," he said, "I am glad for you to find friends amongst these people, and I don't want to interfere with you in the slightest. Entertain them in any way you please, only don't bring me into it—just at present. I have too much on hand to care about making new acquaintances."

Milly was clearly dissatisfied.

"They ain't fine enough for you, I suppose," she remarked. "Won't do after your London friends, eh?"

"I had few friends in London," Strone answered. "My life before that you know. The fact is, I'm not a sociable man. You must do your own entertaining. Your card plate seems full enough."

"My, isn't it!" Milly admitted, with a smile. "It takes all my time, Enoch, going about returning calls. But they all ask about you, and you never seem round. You don't play golf, or ride, or drive, even on Saturdays."

"Those are pursuits," Strone answered, with a faint smile, "to which I may take later on in life. Just now I have more serious things on hand."

"Oh, bother!"

Milly sat with clouded face during the rest of breakfast. Afterwards Strone lit a cigarette, and led her into the garden.

"Milly," he said, "I'm doing the best I can to make you contented. Don't ask for impossibilities. We tried the country, and you found it too dull. I don't blame you. I couldn't be there all the time, of course, and you were lonely. Then you thought you would like a house near Gascester. Well, I 've taken one.

You have the carriage you wanted, and everyone comes to see you. Be satisfied."

"I am satisfied," Milly answered. "Only I don't see what you want to spend all your time fiddling about down at the works."

"It is necessary," Strone answered, "and if it were not I should do it from choice. Good-bye."

He climbed into the dog-cart, and drove towards Gascester with an odd, bitter smile upon his lips. He was passing through the suburb which had once been the place of all others in the world which he had hated the most. He himself was now a resident there, his ambitious dreams checked if not entirely dissipated. The whole aspect of life had been changed for him. One of Mr. Dobell's sons had taken his place in London. Strone had gone back to the works. There was plenty of scope for him there, and it was work which he liked. Yet every now and then a passionate discontent filled his heart. He had been on the threshold of greater things, he had seen a little way into the promised land. Henceforth life could never be more than endurable.

It chanced that John Martinghoe came to see him that morning, keen to look over Strone's wonderful works and model colony, which a leading magazine had made famous. Strone showed him everything—by degrees a certain reserve shared by both of them melted away, they sat and talked over their cigars as in the old days. And Martinghoe, with an abruptness which took the other by surprise, asked him a blunt question.

"Why did you give it up, Strone?"

Strone moved uneasily in his chair. Martinghoe watched his cigar smoke in silence.

"Don't tell me unless you like. It isn't exactly curiosity which makes me ask. Only the pity of the thing strikes home sometimes."

"Ay," Strone repeated as though mechanically, "the pity of the thing."

"Not that your work here isn't something to be proud of," Martinghoe continued. "Only one feels that you've been doctoring a single patient when you've had a remedy for the whole race. I understand, too, that the present Government were most favourably disposed towards you."

"You heard that from your sister?" Strone asked, quickly.

"Yes."

"What else?"

Martinghoe hesitated—only for a moment. They were both men who loved the truth.

"She wrote of you as a man out of his senses. On the threshold of a brilliant future, in which your success was bound up with the betterment of millions of your fellow creatures, you drew back because your wife dislikes London. There's something inexplicable about this, Strone. You gave me your confidence once. I'd like to feel sure that you aren't making a colossal mistake now."

"I should like to be certain of it myself," Strone said, quietly. "Look here, Martinghoe. You married me, and you know all about it. How much of that

balderdash which I repeated at your dictation is binding upon me?"

"Every single word of it," Martinghoe answered.

"For good or for evil—for better or for worse, eh?"

"Most surely."

"Then I could do no other than what I have done," Strone answered. "Listen."

He told Martinghoe the history of that evil night in his life, his finding Milly—asleep—the letter—his promise. And Martinghoe afterwards reckoned that marriage, which from his primitive point of view had seemed to him at the time a simple but necessary act of justice, as one of the evil deeds of his life.

"Your sacrifice," he said, "was at least magnificent. I pray that it may be effectual."

A queer gleam of humour lit up Strone's hard face.

"It is effectual," he answered. "We tried solitude. I did my best with her. It wouldn't do. She hasn't a h'aporth of imagination. Then I sat down and reasoned the matter over. What did other people do in our position who had made money? I took Dobell into my confidence—partly. He never hesitated. Take a house somewhere near Gascester, he said, in the suburbs, and your wife will make friends in ten minutes. And by Jove she did, Martinghoe. If it wasn't for the miserable side of it, I could laugh every time I see our card plate, every time I see Milly sitting in her victoria with her calling hat on. She's positively prim now—almost smug. She shudders at the mention of the Masons. She goes to church twice

on Sundays, and if she drinks wine at all it is only because she thinks teetotalers are bad form."

"It will last, you think?" Martinghoe asked.

Strone nodded.

"Certain. It seems that even in Gascester there are grades of society. I don't know which Milly is in, but she's training for a rise already. Life for her has become a splendid evolution—she'll work her way through the lot. She's got something to think about, and to aim at. She's safe. I'd rather the means had been worthier, but character is immutable. You can't alter Milly."

"And you?"

Across Strone's face there flickered for a moment some shadow of the misery which every now and then was uncontrollable.

"Well," he said, "I have heaps of work here. I'm on the Royal Commission for the Betterment of the Poor, you know, and I still have the reviews. In time, when Milly's anchorage has stood the test of time, I may have another chance. But somehow I feel that I shan't. It isn't often more than once in a lifetime that the doors fly open before one so easily."

"I am glad to have heard your point of view, Strone," Martinghoe said. "I'd like to tell you, if I may, that I think you're right. It was the woman's soul which was in your keeping—and you have saved her. I do not see how you could have justified yourself if you had stood aside and let her sink downwards."

"Your sister," Strone said, quietly, "thought otherwise."

"Beatrice is a very brilliant but a very worldly woman," Martinghoe said. "Of course, her point of view is not indefensible. She is an individualist, and she considers the abnegation of your future a sin against yourself. But Beatrice is full of ambition. You know, of course——"

He stopped short. Something which flashed from Strone's eyes checked him. There was a single luminous moment. Then Martinghoe finished his sentence, having risen and strolled towards the window.

"She has made up her mind at last, I believe, to marry Lord Sydenham. He has been her suitor for many years."

CHAPTER XVII.

Ever the same deep stillness, a sort of brooding calm as though the land slept, the faint rustling of a west wind, the slighter murmuring of insects. And save for these things, silence. Strone stood on the threshold of the empty cottage, which as yet he had not unlocked, looking down upon the familiar patchwork of fields and woods, looking away indeed through the blue filmy light with unseeing eyes, for a whole flood of old memories were tugging at his heartstrings. A curious sense of detachment from himself and his surroundings possessed him. Milly, his house at Gascester, his shattered political career, were like dreams, something chimerical, burdens which had fallen away. A rare sense of freedom was upon him. He took long breaths of the clear, bracing air. The place had its old delight for him. He threw himself upon the turf, and closed his eyes. Here at last was peace.

Then the old madness again, burning in his brain, hot in his blood, driving him across the hills, stirring up again the old recklessness, the old wild delight. She was going to marry Lord Sydenham. She was passing for ever out of his reach, and once she had been very near. His heart shook with passionate recollections. With every step he took his

fierce unrest became a more ungovernable thing. What a farce it all was—his stern attempt at self-control, his life shut off now from everything worth having, a commonplace drone-like existence. After all, what folly. The cup of life had been offered to him, his lips had touched the brim. Was it poison after all which he had seen amongst the dregs? Yet what poison could be worse than this?

Past the Devenhills' house, whence the music of her voice beat the air around him, filled his ears with longing, brought almost the tears to his eyes. Had he lived, indeed, through such delights as these mocking memories would have him believe, when he had watched the roses fluttering through the darkness, elf flowers, yet warm and fragrant enough when he had snatched them from the dusty road, and crept away with them into the shadows! Oh, what manner of man had he become to be the slave of such memories? He was ashamed, yet drunk with the sweet madness of it. Nowhere in this strange country of flowers and sweet odours, of singing birds and delicate breezes, could he hope to escape from the old thrall. The dreary machinery of life seemed no longer possible to him. Milly and her unconquerable vulgarity, his narrowing career, even his work mocked him with their emptiness. He turned backwards to Gascester, but not homewards. He caught the evening express with a moment to spare, flung himself breathless amongst the cushions of an empty carriage just as the train glided from the station. Without any clear purpose in his

mind, he obeyed an impulse which seemed irresistible. He must go to her.

At St. Pancras he remembered for a moment that he was wearing his ordinary homespun clothes, disordered, too, with his long walk and race for the train. Nevertheless he did not hesitate. He called for a hansom, and drove to her house. The servant who admitted him looked him over with surprise, but believed that Lady Malingcourt was within. She was even then dressing for the opera. Strone was shown into her study—and waited.

It was nearly half an hour before she came to him, and whatever feelings his sudden arrival had excited she had had time to conceal them. She came to him buttoning her gloves, and followed by her maid carrying her opera cloak. The latter withdrew discreetly. Strone rose up—a strange figure enough, with his wind-tossed hair and burning eyes.

“You?” she exclaimed, with raised eyebrows. “How wonderful!”

The sight of her, the sound of her voice, were fuel to his smouldering passion. His heart was hot with the love of her.

“Is it true?” he asked, fiercely. “I have seen your brother. He says that you are going to marry Lord Sydenham.”

She looked at him in faint surprise.

“And why on earth should I not marry Lord Sydenham?” she asked.

It was like a sudden chill. She was angry, then, or

she did not care. Yet there had been times when she had looked at him differently. He made an effort at repression.

"There is no reason why you should not," he admitted. "There is no reason why you should not tell me—if it be true. For God's sake, tell me."

"It is perfectly true," she answered.

Then there was a silence. The man looked into a hopeless future, the woman buttoned her gloves. When she had finished she looked him steadily in the face.

"My friend," she said, "it is you yourself who are responsible for our unlived lives. You had the gates open before you—you preferred respectability, a villa at Gascester and the domestic virtues. I do not blame you. I have ceased even to wonder at your amazing blunder. Only, having made your choice, why do you come down upon me in a whirlwind of passion as though the thing which I have done was not the most natural thing in the world?"

"It is not natural," he cried. "Lord Sydenham is nothing to you."

"Well, he soon will be—my husband."

"You do not care for him."

"An excellent reason to marry him then. I shall have no disenchantment to fear."

"Oh, this is mockery," he cried. "You can juggle with words, I know. I am no match for you at that. Don't!"

"Don't what?"

"Marry Lord Sydenham."

She nodded her head thoughtfully.

"On certain conditions," she answered, "I will not."

"What are they?" he asked, hoarsely.

"You accept the place in the Government which was offered to you and re-enter political life."

"Well?"

"You never ask more of my friendship than I am willing to give."

"Well?"

"You leave your wife altogether."

He started, and shook his head slowly.

"You don't understand. Milly has—a weakness. Even now I have to be always watching."

"I know more of your wife than you think," she answered. "I know the circumstances of your marriage, and something of her life since. My conditions must stand."

"Do you know," he said, "that it would mean ruin to her—body and soul?"

"She is not fit to be your wife," Lady Malingcourt said, coldly. "You can never make her fit. I think that you would be justified in ignoring her claim upon you. There are limits to one's responsibility."

"Your brother would not say so," Strone remarked, thoughtfully.

"My brother is narrowed by his religion," she answered. "He has taken it in too large a dose, and he has lost his sense of proportion. The duty you owe to a woman with whom you have gabbled over the

marriage service is of no account beside the duty you owe to the whole world of your fellow creatures."

"These," he said, "are your conditions."

"Yes."

He drew near to her. The struggle of the last few months seemed lined into his face.

"Listen," he said. "I want to be honest—to you. I can't see it any way but this. There's the woman and all the great underneath millions I wanted to help on one side—and on the other—you."

"No," she interrupted. "Your life's work was never meant to be in Gascester. It is your domestic duty, or what you imagine to be your domestic duty, against your duty to your fellow creatures. You can leave me out. The balance is struck without me. Be a man. Free yourself—make use of your powers. The world is a great place for such as you. Strike off your shackles."

"There will be no more—Lord Sydenhams?" he asked, breathlessly.

She smiled upon him—a transforming, transfiguring smile. It was the woman who looked out upon him from those soft, clear eyes.

"I am not anxious," she said, "to be married at all. Only one must do something. And lately London has been very dull. Is that you, Sydenham. I am quite ready. I am afraid that you must be tired of waiting."

Lord Sydenham had entered almost noiselessly. He looked from one to the other doubtfully.

"I am not interrupting anything in the nature of a

conspiracy, I trust?" he enquired, with a faint note of sarcasm.

Lady Malingcourt smiled.

"I am endeavouring to make Mr. Strone repent of his hasty decision," she said, "I believe that I have succeeded."

CHAPTER XVIII.

Strone walked in his grounds before breakfast, his hands behind his back, his face furrowed and anxious with thought. He had all the sensations of an executioner. Milly had to be faced—his decision made known to her. All the way from St. Pancras this thing had been before him, had hung around his pillow like an ugly nightmare. Now, in the clear morning sunlight, the brutality of it seemed to be staring him in the face. She was settling down so eagerly into this new life, so proud of her home and belongings, so timidly anxious to avoid any of those small lapses which kindled Strone's irritability. Of course she could continue exactly as she was. There would be no difficulty about her income—she could go on her way making friends, become even a power in the small social world, whose recognition had given her such unqualified delight. But Strone was not a man to deceive himself, and he knew very well that under the good-natured vulgar exterior there remained the woman, passionate, jealous, hyper-sensitive. He remembered that last night in Marlow Crescent. He had saved her then only to fling her back into the abyss! He tried hard to reason with himself. There was a world open to him of which she could not possibly become a denizen. Her presence by his side would hamper his

career—would place him continually in a false position, would be a serious drawback to him in the great struggle on behalf of those suffering millions into which he was longing to throw himself. For Strone at least was honest in this. His personal ambition was a small thing. He was an enthusiast in a great and unselfish cause. The favour of Lord Sydenham, the social recognition which Lady Malingcourt was able to secure for him, he welcomed only as important means towards his great end. He was shrewd enough to see their importance, but for society "ipse facto" he had no predilection whatever.

"Enoch!"

She came out to him across the lawn. He turned and watched her thoughtfully. She wore a loose white morning wrapper, simply made and absolutely inoffensive, and he noticed, too, that the fringe against which he had made several ineffectual protests was brushed back, greatly to the improvement of her appearance. She was pale, and her eyes watched him anxiously. Almost it seemed to him that she might in some way have divined what was in store for her.

"Enoch," she exclaimed. "You are home then."

"Yes," he answered. "I came in so late last night that I did not disturb you. Is breakfast ready?"

"Waiting."

She led the way and he followed her. She asked him no questions as to his unexplained absence yesterday, and she made several attempts at conversation, to which he returned only vague answers. Towards the close of the meal he looked up at her.

"I want to have a few words with you, Milly, before I go," he said. "Will you come into the study when we have finished?"

She nodded.

"Come into my workroom," she said. "I've got something to say to you. I—I had a visitor yesterday."

Even when they were alone and the door was shut, he shrank from his task. He looked around, surprised at the evidences of industry.

"Are you making your own dresses?" he asked. "I didn't think that was in your line."

"No, but there is plenty of work to do," she answered, hurriedly. "Enoch, I had a visitor yesterday."

"You get a good many, don't you?" he answered, indifferently.

"This one was different. It was Mr. Martinghoe."

He was surprised.

"Did he come to see you?"

"No, he came to see you," she answered. "He had been to the works, but you were not there. He stayed for a long time, and we had a talk."

"Well?"

She got up, and stood leaning with her elbow on the mantelpiece. For the first time a certain fragility in her appearance struck him. He had always considered her the personification of coarse, good health. She spoke, too, without her usual bluntness, with unusual choice of words, and some nervousness. Strone awoke to the fact that there was a change in her.

"Enoch," she said, "Mr. Martinghoe brought some

news. You'll hear it when you get to the works, for he will be there to meet you. Somehow, though, I'm glad to be the first to tell you. They want you to stand for Parliament for the Northern Division of Gascestershire."

He stared at her.

"What?"

"It is the Conservatives. There's a deputation of 'em coming. Mr. Martinghoe don't say much, but I think it's through him."

Strone was amazed.

"A rural constituency," he remarked, half to himself. "It wouldn't do at all. Besides——"

"Please I want to go on," Milly interrupted. "Enoch, there's Melborough in the division. That's quite a large town now."

He nodded.

"Well?"

"Enoch, I want you to do me a great, great favour," she said, earnestly. "I want you to accept this offer. Don't interrupt. I know that it will take you back into the life you gave up for me. I don't care. I've been thinking about that lately, and I reckon I've been a selfish beast. I made you give up the things you liked, and you might have become a great man but for me. Enoch, I'm all right now. I'll swear it. There's never no more fear about me. I'll live in London with you, or here, and you can come down when you can spare a bit of time. I ain't going to be a bit jealous of anything or anybody. I ain't indeed. And, Enoch, I want to be a better wife to you," she added,

with a little tearful break in her tone, "if I can. I ain't the wife you ought to have married, dear. I know that. I ought to have been clever, and known how to dress and talk nicely, and all sorts of things. I'm going to try and improve. It's too late for you to choose again, Enoch, but you've been real good to me, and I ain't going to give you any more trouble."

A transformation. Something had found its way into Milly's heart and stirred up all the good that was there into vigorous life. In her eager tear-dimmed eyes he saw something shining which altered for ever his point of view. He was bewildered. What was this thing which he had had in his mind! Yesterday seemed far away: the thought of it made him shudder. But what had come to Milly? He reached out his hand, and struck from the table by his side a soft, shapeless object. He picked it up, looked at it in blank amazement. It was a half-dressed doll.

"What on earth are you doing with this, Milly?" he exclaimed.

"I—I bought it at a bazaar. I thought I'd like to have it. . . . Enoch!"

Her tone was half apologetic, half tremulous. Their eyes met, and he understood. A new sense of humanity brought man and woman into a wonderful kinship. He opened his arms, and Milly crept into them with a little sob of content.

THE END.

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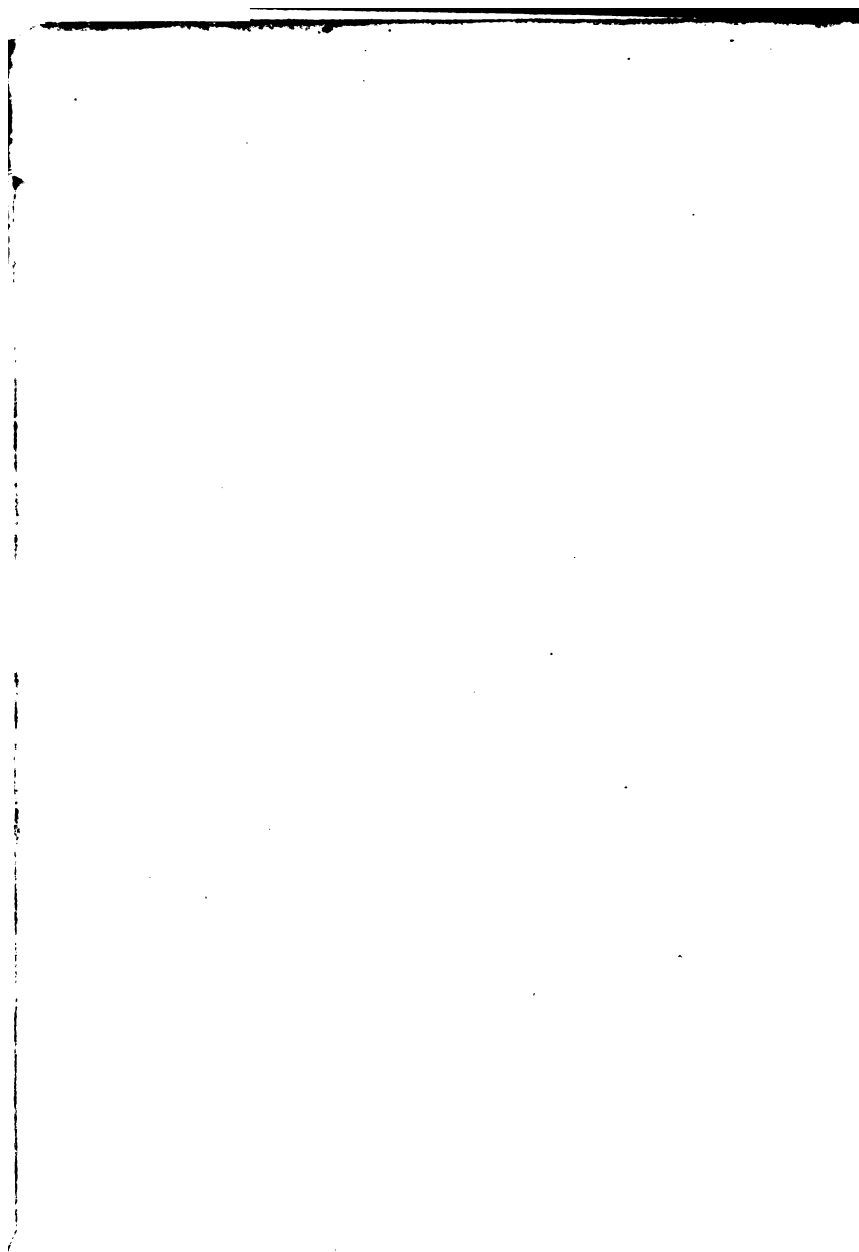
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